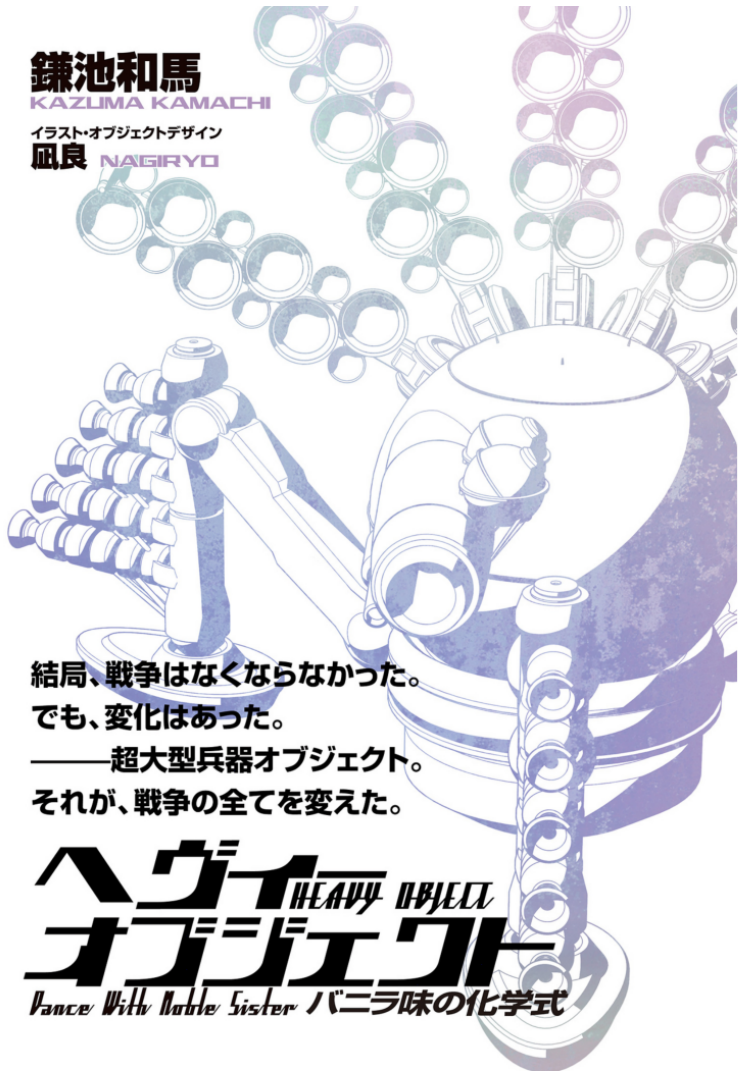
鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI
イラスト・オブジェクトデザイン／
凪良 NAGIRYO
ヘヴィオブジェクト
HEAVY OBJECT
Lance With Noble Sister バニラ味の化学式
電撃文庫

Novel Illustrations



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【アントライオン】Antlion

「資本企業」が運用する陸戦専用第二世代。アリジゴクを意味するコードネームのとおり、砂漠での戦闘に特化した機体。周囲キロ単位にわたって巨大な流砂を人工的に生み出し、敵オブジェクトを翻弄する。

球体状本体の真下にある静電気式フロートの他、四本のアームによって柔らかい砂地に太い杭を打ち込む形で地面を掴み、本体を手繰り寄せるように前後左右への強烈な初速を実現。

オブジェクト右側には主砲となる連速ビーム砲、左側には人工流砂発生用高周波振動ロッド散布器が装備されている。

Designed by Hirokazu Watanabe(2725 inc.)

name/Azusena Jane Winchell
sex/Female
place of birth/Paris,Normandie
age/22
height/163cm
weight/47kg
weight/48kg
body size/83-57-82cm
hair color/blond
eye color/blue
class/succession ranking No.05
belong/Winchells family member
post/daughter of blue blood

HEAVYOBJECT
ヘイロイア
クウェンサー
ケビン
ミリンダ
バンダービルトの令嬢
アズライブィア＝ウィンチェル

それでもダメなら
掌返して皆殺しにしちまえ!
わたくしとヘイヴィア様の
婚約を邪魔する者は全て!!

—バンダービルト家令嬢の叫び—

HEAVY OBJECT

Dance With Noble Sister

ヘヴィーオブジェクト
バニラ味の化学式

鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI

Prologue

Call Sign Ice Girl 1 to CT.

Objective achieved in combat airspace RG-219. Red Target confirmed killed. Successfully prevented target's entry into the country. Requesting return to Texas AB. Awaiting approval.

———

I'm sure you've figured it out based on the point at which you lost the signal, but it crashed in a fairly troublesome place. It's that oasis involved in the territorial dispute. I'm sure "they" will get themselves involved in this soon enough. That said, the greedy border patrol is probably celebrating. The inspectors have been insisting they need a chance to prove their worth and they're terrified of having their funding cut, so this is a good chance for them.

———

Ice Girl 1 to CT. Don't worry about us. We might have skipped some of the formalities, but it was necessary given the overall state of the Capitalist Corporations. And I'm used to being thrown in a cell.

This is only a personal opinion, but there are a few things I just can't stand: red meat that hasn't been prepared properly, kids who kick old folks in the back, and you know what else.

Do you know the band Boy Racer?

I don't have enough fingers to count the number of reasons they

went off the deep end, but that was the biggest reason. Just talking about it is enough to piss me off.

———

Roger that, CT. Thanks for the approval to return.

Ice Girl 1 to Ice Squadron. Our next destination is Texas AB. An ice cold bath and sodas are waiting in the middle of the desert. This short break is your chance to request at least a smidgen of leave. If you want to spread your wings in Vegas, then get that paperwork ready. You only have yourself to blame if you aren't prepared.

Oh, c'mon, you idiots.

Don't worry about me. Only the one in charge needs to spend any time in a cell.

Chapter 1: A War of Two Birds with One Stone > > Crashed Plane Rescue Operation in the Rio Grande District

Part 1

It was July in the middle of the desert in the Central American Rio Grande District. Below a blazing sun that would have fit in right alongside cacti and cowboy hats, the Legitimacy Kingdom's 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion was faced with an unprecedented danger.

Namely…

"As the independent Black Uniform unit, we will now meld an unscheduled inspection! All members of the 37th must follow our instructions regardless of rank!!"

It was absolute chaos.

The Black Uniforms were an independent unit with special privileges. Their primary mission was to police the troops. In other words, they performed investigations, made reports, and supplied punishments to ensure the Legitimacy Kingdom units deployed around the world did not go on a rampage or secretly commit war crimes.

They were of course frightening. Incredibly frightening.

That was hardly surprising when they carried guns filled with bullets meant for their allies, not the enemy.

Quenser and Heivia's maintenance base zone was a collection of over one hundred large vehicles, but shouts, screams, sobs, and lawyer-like arguments blended together in the barracks where the soldiers lived.

"Nooo!! I can't sleep without Honey the Bear! It has a major effect on my combat readiness, so you should actually pay for it!!"

"Not a chance. Confiscated."

"Wait, wait. This may look like the latest handheld gaming system, but the electronic simulation division is constantly researching

terrorist equipment made by modifying civilian devices to develop countermeasures. If you check the special addition to Article 30 Line 2 of the regulations-…"

"Confiscated."

"Ahhh, wait! I'll give up on everything under the bed, but please don't check above the ceiling!!"

"Why do these people have so many personal items!? And what is this!? Who filled this gun's control chip with access keys to strip chats!? This is military property!!"

In the middle of it all, Battlefield Student Quenser Barbotage looked like a deadbeat husband trying to stop his wife from leaving after she handed him divorce papers. Atop the scorching desert sand, he clung to the waist of a young woman with glasses, short blonde hair, and giant breasts. The size of her breasts must have been a sign of how well-behaved she was!

His face was of course covered in tears and snot.

"C'mooooooon! Don't be like that. Surely you can let this much slide!! Right, miss!?"

"No, no, no! B-besides, why do you have so many massagers!? It's indecent!!"

"Ehhh? They're just health devices. If they look inappropriate to you, I think that's a sign of your own dirty mind. Grin, grin. Does that mean you know of an indecent way of using these things? Smirk, smirk."

"Confiscated."

"Noooo!! Wait! Tits! Hear me out, miss! Tits! I have a legit reason to have these! Tits!!"

"Where do you think you're shoving your face!? Do you want me to add lack of respect to your list of offenses!? Do you *want* to spend the night in a cell!?"

“Ehhh? Spend a night in a cell? With you?”

“Why would-… Why would I spend a night locked up with you!?”

“Heh. They do say the summer sun can lead people to dangerous love affairs. What’s wrong with spending some time together in a cramped space? Don’t worry. I’m down with being on the top or the bottom.”

“Major Capistrano! I would like to request a drug test!! His language is a complete mess and I cannot make heads or tails of what he’s trying to say. Are you sure he’s okay!?”

Busty and silver-haired Frolaytia Capistrano lightly scratched her head with a long, skinny kiseru in her mouth while she leaned against a metal container placed on the sand.

“That guy can see angels when completely sober, so there’s nothing you can do.”

“Major, you aren’t much better. Don’t try to distract me with that clean and upright atmosphere.”

Frolaytia’s love of the Island Nation was well-known within the battalion, so Quenser wondered if her collection would be confiscated too.

“This is an issue of authority, lieutenant. I’m willing to grant the Black Uniforms their independence, but you must also respect my right to secrecy as an officer who remotely commands multiple units and their Pilot Elites. Simply put, stay out of my room.”

“Noooo fairrrrrr! Why do you get the only safe space!? And if you knew this inspection was coming, why didn’t you hide our things in there too!?”

Quenser’s eyes opened wide, but then something unbelievable happened.

The Black Uniform woman recklessly snatched Frolatyia’s kiseru from her mouth.

“I will keep out of your room as asked, but nothing is stopping me outside of that space. I will be confiscating this, major.”

The busty commander replied quite charmingly with an indescribable smile.

“Do you want me to ***** your ***** all the way to the back of your *****, you *****?”

“Threats will get you nowhere. Confiscated☆”

Even if it was unscheduled, why was such a large scale inspection being carried out now? Quenser asked and his busty commander answered.

“A carefree noble from a safe country is apparently making a surprise visit, so we’re getting all cleaned up so they won’t see anything that might offend them.”

“Talk about a nuisance! And how is it a surprise visit if we know it’s coming!?”

“Who was it again? Oh, right. Some girl known as the Blue Rose of Winchell.”

“I’m going to kill Heivia!!”

Pissed, Quenser looked around with killer intent in his eyes (and while still clinging to the young woman). Word must have already gotten around because Private Heivia Winchell was being ganged up on by several other soldiers.

The noble boy tried to explain himself.

“I’m telling you, this has nothing to do with me! B-besides, the Blue Rose? With a flower in the name, it’s obviously a girl, but I don’t even know her name. She’s some sister several places or even a dozen or so places down the line from me! This is as much trouble for me as for you!!”

“This guy has more little sisters than he can count and he has the nerve to call it ‘trouble’!? This is worse than that legend from the

Island Nation who had a dozen little sisters!!”

“Get him!”

“Death to the bourgeois who have grown fat in this age of plenty!!”

Blows could be heard landing and the short-haired blonde glasses woman managed to remove Quenser from her waist. She was blushing a little and she raised her index finger in front of her face in scolding gesture.

“Anyway! We will be taking away all items that are not mission essential. No excuses! Goodbye!!”

After straightening her back in a salute, the frustrated young lady left with her butt wiggling back and forth inside her tight skirt. Frolaytia spoke to Quenser who had collapsed to the scorching desert sand.

“Well?”

“Yes?”

“You got awfully close to that Black Uniform, but I assume you had a reason.”

She grinned and Quenser gave a wicked smile in return.

He tossed up the handheld device hidden in his palm.

“With some help from the electronic simulation division, I successfully stole the data using a contactless transmission. I’ve located the planned storage site of the confiscated items. If we can swap out the items before they write up their list, they’ll be happy with a pile of worthless junk.”

“Very good then. …That kiseru used the Island Nation’s Wajima lacquer. I’m not losing it to some little girl with no eye for value.”

With that irritated comment, she knocked on the door of the container behind her.

The contents avalanched out. It was packed full of cheap folk crafts of unknown use that had likely been bought at local souvenir shops.

“When I heard an inspection was coming, I wanted some insurance just in case. Now, time for Round 2, Quenser.”

“This is scary. That busty commander makes for one hell of an ally when she’s actually on your side.”

Part 2

Quenser Barbotage began his unofficial mission. He used the stolen data on his handheld device to approach a cluster of tents in one corner of the maintenance base zone. The tents were large, like circus tents. They were lined up like harbor warehouses, but he accurately pinpointed one of them and peeked inside while pressing up against the wall and wondering if that actually made him stand out more. Then he snuck inside.

The warehouse seemed to have originally contained components for the vehicles making up the base. There had been a lot of spare space so that the components could be taken out at any time, but those calculated gaps were now filled with confiscated personal items.

He thought back to what Major Frolaytia Capistrano had told him.

“Since we’re out in the blazing sun in July and the Gulf of Mexico is so nearby, I was honestly thinking of giving us all a break at the beach once we completed our mission. But I guess I’ll have to cancel those plans now that all of our swimsuits were taken away. It really is a shame.”

(Curse you, Black Uniform!! Don’t think you can get away with everything just because you wear intellectual glasses and have giant tits! I’ll make sure to get your email address later!!)

Quenser’s heart burned with (supposedly) righteous anger as he used his handheld device’s map to jot down the general location of the personal items. Once he was done, a unit with a cargo cart would show up. He had to remove a few of the tent’s stakes, secretly invite them in, and then replace the real personal items with the container’s worth of decoy folk crafts.

It was a race against time, but he wanted to check for Black Uniform patrols, cameras, or IR sensors.

They could not fool the Black Uniforms unless they pulled off their

magic trick before a list of the items was made.

But…

“Zun-cha-cha… Zun-zun-cha-cha…”

“?”

He heard a female voice that sounded out of place in the tense atmosphere of the tent warehouse.

He doubted an unrelated soldier had just so happened to come here, so it had to be a Black Uniform. Quenser knew nothing about infiltration, so he pointlessly crouched down and checked on the situation.

The student peered out from behind a giant metal rack.

“Ahhh. It’s so hot today.”

It was a Black Uniform.

Specifically, it was the young woman with glasses, short blond hair, and giant breasts.

She may have had a habit of speaking her thoughts aloud when she was alone. Even if the tent was larger than a school building, she must have still thought of it as “indoors”. He could not deny the possibility that she was the type to talk to the TV while she ate dinner. Regardless, she was completely defenseless here.

But something was strange. Even if she thought no one else was around, he could not figure out why she would be stripping off her black uniform and its tight skirt. A cutesy and frilly pink one-piece swimsuit was revealed below.

And she was not done there.

It may have belonged to someone in the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion, but she used a hose to fill a round inflatable pool and then she sat down in it. Her long legs could not fit and had to stick outside the plastic edge. She acted like she was relaxing in a bubble

bath at home and a waterproof bath TV must have been floating in the water. He could hear the sound of the broadcast picked up from the Capitalist Corporations.

"…and for the aforementioned reasons, the stockholder meetings for 7th Core, the seven corporations ruling our home country, are filled with lively debate over the so-called Home Treatment Proposal. Pressure from the related agencies has shown signs of relaxing the standards, but some experts have indicated fears that it will increase the burden on the patient…"

The topic on the TV was oddly serious, but it still excited Quenser because it too was a sign of that well-behaved young lady's private side being defenselessly exposed.

What happened next clinched it. As she relaxed in the pool, she held up something familiar. It was one of the massagers she had taken from Quenser earlier.

(Dammit. I was trying to make an experimental naval destruction device by lining them up along the aquarium wall, but she had to ruin everything. …Wait, what is she doing?)

"Hm? Is this how you do it? You hit this switch and…ah!?"

She hesitantly pressed it to her shoulder and her finger seemed to touch the switch. It vibrated more than she had expected, so her shoulders jumped and she dropped it.

She stared at it for a bit and tried again.

"I never knew these were so amazing… Oh, ohhhhhhh. I see. Ohhhhhhhh. So you go like this, and…ahhh…"

The young woman who had traded her Black Uniform for a pink swimsuit gradually got used to the massager as she held it to her shoulder, relaxed her entire body, and sank into the plastic pool. She rested her head on the edge of the pool and stared blankly up at the ceiling.

As you might have guessed, a whispering voice grew at an explosive rate inside Quenser Barbotage's mind.

(What should I do? What do I do now!? This well-behaved Black Uniform's eyes are beginning to wander as she opens the door to a brand new world, but do I give her a hands-on lecture or do I adore her ignorance from afar? I can't decide!!!!!)

To be clear, this place had temporarily been setup as the Black Uniforms' personal space, so even a student would be in serious trouble if discovered inside. And if it was found out he was plotting to retrieve their confiscated items, he could not possibly avoid being disciplined.

So he used all his willpower to break free of this honey trap and made the right decision to complete the retrieval mission given to him by Frolaytia.

But…

"Oh, whoops. I need to get that list made."

She had said it.

That blonde young woman had said it.

Quenser had to swap out the confiscated items with the decoy items before that list was made.

If the list was made ahead of time, their plan would end in failure.

That meant he had to do whatever it took to prevent that list's completion!

That gave him the justification he needed.

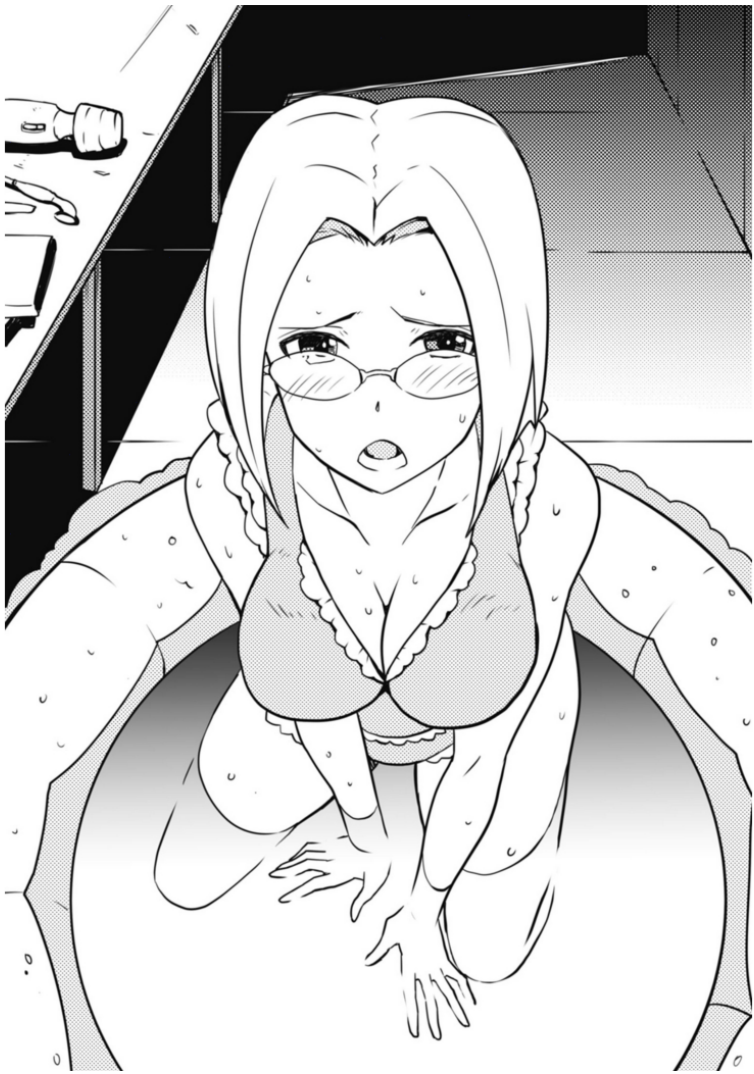
The boy would later describe as if it were a part of his memoirs:

That was when I could no longer restrain the demon growing inside my chest.

-Battlefield Student Quenser Barbotage.

"Geh heh heh!! Looks like you're enjoying yourself there, Miss Black Uniform!! I never thought you'd be using someone's confiscated

possessions to have such a nice relaxing time in here!!”



“Eh? Eh? Ah…hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

“You fool. Crossing your hands now isn’t enough to hide those giant tits!! And if you want me to keep quiet about this, you’re going to help me with a few things, Miss Relaxation! Oh, this is so much fun. There’s something wrong with having such a straight-laced young lady only able to say ‘yes’ or ‘of course’! Ah ha ha ha ha ha!!”

“Wh-why are you even here!? We have used our special privileges to temporarily make this a protected zone, so if I report you-…!!”

“Ohhh? You talk big for someone in a swimsuit. You must have been looking forward to this. Were you wearing that swimsuit under your uniform? Are you a child? Were you that excited about going to the beach?”

“Ghh!?”

“But do the uniform rules say anything about allowing that? I don’t remember seeing anything about wearing a frilly pink swimsuit underneath the uniform. Hmm? Does that mean you were breaking military regulations by bringing your own personal items here? But surely one of the well-behaved Black Uniforms wouldn’t do that.”

“…”

“What does a dog say?”

“Wo-…woof.”

“Heh heh heh Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!”

Part 3

That bout of information warfare was continuing below the surface, but…

“Today’s mission is to rescue a Legitimacy Kingdom transport plane that was shot down by the Capitalist Corporations.”

Frolaytia feigned ignorance while briefing her troops in the meeting room.

She gently waved her kiseru around as if to show it off to everyone, but the Black Uniforms mixed in with the others did not notice. That was proof that they had successfully swapped out the warehouse contents before the list was completed.

“The mission itself is simple. Travel to the site of the crash and rescue the crew if they’re still alive or retrieve the bodies if they’re not. That’s all. The problem is where it is.”

She projected a map onto the white wall behind her. It was the region just south of North America that bordered the Gulf of Mexico.

“As you know, North America is a hot zone with the Capitalist Corporations’ home country to the west and the Information Alliance’s to the east. The Central American Rio Grande District here is the entrance to both those world powers. The vast desert is the site of a territorial dispute between the two, so for over thirty years, throwing an empty can there could easily trigger a war.”

And then a Legitimacy Kingdom transport plane had crashed in that desert.

But why had it been flying somewhere so dangerous?

“A large-scale demilitarized zone exists down the center of North America to divide the Capitalist Corporations on the west and the Information Alliance on the east. It’s known as the Greater Canyon

and it's a two hundred kilometer wide blank zone cutting north to south through the center of North America. …Since the two armies are too busy glaring at each other to do anything, it also acts as a silk road for a wide variety of people, but someone must have been in a particularly bad mood this time."

"You mean the Legitimacy Kingdom transport plane was trying to cut across North America using that silk road, but it messed up and was shot down in the Central American entrance?"

Quenser summed up the issue and Frolaytia nodded.

"Where it crashed is also a problem. Water is very important in a desert and it crashed right on top of an oasis. That's right in the center of the territorial dispute. Both the Capitalist Corporations and the Information Alliance will try to interfere if we go to rescue the plane's crew."

"If they're gonna insist they have authority there, then they need to rescue anyone that's crashed there, dammit," complained Heivia who was bruised and swollen all over.

Frolaytia ignored him and continued.

"We will send out the Baby Magnum, but as I said, the main countries of the Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance are just north of here. That means we'll be overpowered if it comes to a serious fight. We only have to settle the transport plane issue. I repeat, do not think about fighting and winning. Poking at the hornet's nest will only call in an inexhaustible supply of enemy reinforcements."

Next, the Black Uniform with glasses and short blonde hair stepped up onto the platform.

She had of course changed from her pink swimsuit to her tight skirt uniform.

She spoke flawlessly as if the "previous incident" had never happened.

"Attention, everyone. I am Lieutenant Meena Stinger of Special

Platoon 15.”

She gave the bare minimum of an introduction.

“This mission is not protected by any official treaties, but we have been told even the Legitimacy Kingdom home country is watching because an implicit agreement has been broken. And as a Black Uniform that enforces the rules of the battlefield, I am very worried about any moral hazards that may cross a line, either internally or externally. …In other words, I would like to bring an end to this chaos.”

“Lady, what exactly are you saying?”

When Quenser spoke to her, her shoulders jumped and she cleared her throat to regain her train of thought.

“Enjoy this daytrip and be back tonight. This is a simple mission as always, but the location is a tricky one. As we are asking this of you, we will not leave you empty-handed. The Special 15th will lend you as much personnel as we can. The oasis in question is at the center of an endless back-and-forth territorial dispute between the Capitalist Corporations and the Information Alliance. We expect it will be much more heavily equipped than it appears. Of most concern…”

Meena paused before continuing.

“…are the reports of landmines. Be very careful.”

Part 4

Period 1 of hell had begun.

The potatoes of the Legitimacy Kingdom were crawling below the blazing sun and the scorching sand that reached temperatures exceeding sixty degrees Celsius. There were more than three hundred of them. Every last one of them was dripping with unpleasant sweat, some were aiming handgun-shaped sensors toward the ground, and others were slowly sticking knives into the sand to carefully retrieve can-sized pieces of metal.

Heivia tossed one to the side and spat out a complaint.

“All that worry and it’s an empty can? I don’t want it to be a real one, so why do I feel so disappointed!? There are decoys buried all over the place, but the next one could be the real deal. I can’t believe they would do this!!”

“It’s better than having real landmines all over the place, right? And getting angry is only going to make you overlook a real one.”

“And it’s a can for beef stew! They even get good food!!”

“Watch the anger.”

Quenser was just as fed up with the situation.

They were more than one thousand meters from the oasis. The tall sunflower field blooming unnaturally in the desert was already visible in the distance, but the Legitimacy Kingdom troops were moving at a snail’s pace and they never seemed to get any closer.

Plus, they were more than just sandwiched between the scorching sun and sand. Every time they heard the beeping of a metal detector, they were assaulted by enough tension to feel like an invisible stake in the heart. In all serious, it felt like they had been crawling along for over a week.

“Don’t let your guard down just because there are empty cans

everywhere. You heard what the Black Uniforms said, right? There are an estimated thirty thousand mines around here. It's a flower garden of landmines. Carelessly step on one and you'll set off a fireworks festival at ground level."

One of those well-behaved Black Uniforms was already melting into the desert a short distance away. They usually investigated war crimes in the maintenance base, so she was not used to being out on the battlefield. Her trademark black uniform seemed downright suicidal in the July desert. Quenser was impressed that she did not strip it off like in the North Wind and the Sun.

He was whispering his assessment while looking over at the long black-haired young woman with an exposed forehead who was likely one of Meena's subordinates.

For some voluntary help in the ESP research rumored to be a top secret military experiment, he focused on her defenseless chest to see if he could develop X-ray vision. Really, he was just staring intently at the yellow bra showing through her sweaty blouse.

"Lemon yellow, huh? And a size-enhancing bra? …I guess not all of those well-behaved Black Uniforms have giant tits."

"You're scaring me. I don't know anyone else who could say that kind of thing about a woman with the right to kill her allies."

That said, the two idiots knew perfectly well why the flat-chested Black Uniform was so annoyed.

They too had been crawling across the scorching sand at a snail's pace.

It was all thanks to those mines buried everywhere.

"Why would they use so damn many of them? Were they trying to use up some extra inventory or something? Have they forgotten anyone gets blown up just the same if they step on these things?"

"These are smart mines, Heivia. They have a safety that picks up their allies' IC signal, so they feel perfectly safe scattering them everywhere. I saw on a news site that these things have passed the

assault rifle to become the most common weapon on the battlefield."

"Are you serious?" Heivia looked around while still lying on the ground. "Then what are those rusty trucks and armored vehicles I can see all over the place? They were clearly blown up by the mines."

"They're about as reliable as the shoplifting alarms at the entrance of a store, unfortunately."

An irregular rumbling reached them from the distance. The Baby Magnum was probably in an exciting clash with the Capitalist Corporations Second Generation Antlion.

"Besides, this isn't how people break through a minefield these days. Why can't we send a downpour of shellfire this way to blow up the entire minefield and then cross safely after the fact?"

"Have you forgotten that this is the entrance to the Capitalist Corporations and the Information Alliance and that poking at the hornet's nest will only summon an unending supply of reinforcements? The Princess is gathering the worker bees' attention over there, so we can't trigger a huge explosion over here."

Quenser pulled a card from what looked like a deck of playing cards and placed it on top of the desert sand. It was a marker that reflected radio signals and connecting those dots would reveal a safe route without any mines.

"If these are high-tech mines, then can't we sit back and get a nice tan while we wait for the batteries to die?"

"They apparently generate their own power from the desert's heat, so they can keep running indefinitely."

After setting down a decent number of markers, Quenser and Heivia took a break behind a sand dune while the others followed along the safe zone they had created. Clearing mines wore at one's nerves, so they made progress by taking turns and giving each other short breaks.

However, the group for the next shift was dressed oddly.

“What the hell? Are those powered suits?”

“They’re bomb squad equipment,” said one of them. “We remembered they were gathering dust in storage, so we just dug them out.”

“Damn that busty commander! I swear I’m going to give her such a groping!!”

“Are you all okay wearing those suits out in this blazing sun? I feel like I’m going to get heatstroke just looking at you.”

“That’s why we’re covered in cooling patches. It’s so much I’m a little afraid we’re going to be too cold.”

The hunks of metal crossed the sand dune.

Quenser could only curse Frolaytia for leaving them poorly-equipped and only able to clear the mines by hand, but he guessed they could probably borrow the powered suits for their next shift. His radio conveyed the cheerful conversation of the group protected by the thick armor.

“Found a mine.”

“That was fast. Good, good. …This is the fuse here. Now let’s transform this into a lovely tray even a waitress would be comfortable using.”

Heivia took a sip of his water bottle.

“Disarming bombs sure is easy. All you have to do is grab and twist the bottom of the fuse with some pliers.”

“That’s because the puzzle-like detonators in dramas are completely unnecessary. They just get in the way if you want to remove the bomb yourself. That can happen if one fails to detonate or the situation changes, so only criminals who just have to leave them can make puzzles out of them.”

The powered suit group continued speaking over the radio.

“Dig up the sand around it. We need to see if there are any wires connecting elsewhere.”

“All checked. Lift this one up and it won’t go off.”

“Hm?” said Quenser with a frown.

Then he paled.

“Wait, you idiot! It isn’t that simp-…!!”

He did not have time to yell into the radio.

There was an explosion beyond the sand dune and the wall of sand itself crumbled like a landslide.

Even behind cover, Quenser and Heivia had the breath knocked out of them when the blast struck their backs. A little further away, the (flat-chested) black-haired exposed-forehead Black Uniform was flipped over with her legs spread, so her shapely butt was sticking up into the air.

Quenser covered his face with a hand.

“Damn, so her panties were sky blue. You mean the bra and panties don’t match!?”

“That’s not the issue here and why do I have to be the straight man!?”

The two idiots coughed and peered over the new shape of the sand dune. A portion of the desert had become a crater and the powered suits were squirming about quite energetically.

“What was that? Didn’t they say they’d removed the fuse!?”

“There was another mine buried below that one. That’s what happens if you let your guard down!”

However, the detonation of the mine was not what mattered.

The sound of the blast had reached the oasis protected by those countless smart mines.

“The Capitalist Corporations’ border patrol is going to respond to that!”

They had poked the hornet’s nest.

Continuing to crawl along quietly would be the same as waiting for death. The military force at the oasis would be coming and it was also possible a Second Generation guarding the home country would get off its butt to deal with them.

In other words, they needed to settle this quickly.

They swiftly sent a report back to the maintenance base zone and their plan was changed.

“Brave pyramid-building slaves, if you don’t want to be trampled underfoot by your own allies, then get out of the way!”

When they heard that announcement over the radio, Quenser and Heivia rapidly rolled to the side. Several armored trucks with bulldozer-like shovels on the front drove past. They scraped a bit into the sand to intentionally detonate the mines and clear a route.

But the oasis did not sit idly by.

Again and again, they heard the sounds of compressed air being released.

Narrow trails of smoke flew in long arcs and stabbed into the top of the armored trucks.

After a tremendous explosion, the scorched masses of metal flew up into the air.

Weak-kneed Heivia complained loudly about the unfairness of the world.

“Can you really call those mines!?”

“They’re top-attack weapons that target the top of a tank. There are landmines that are fired up from a thicket when a sensor detects something and then fall back down on the target. This is just a broad interpretation of that concept!!”

“We saw this coming,” someone said over the radio. “Those armored trucks are unmanned and remote controlled. Don’t think about rescuing them. Continue along the already cleared route to reduce our losses as much as possible. No matter how good their mines are, they only have a limited number. We’ll trample them all underfoot!!”

Several more vain explosions sounded.

Still, if this continued, the minefield did seem like it would run out of mines.

Quenser and Heivia plugged their ears and breathed slowly, but then things changed.

They heard a few noises much like the fireworks that signaled the beginning of an athletic festival.

Narrow trails of smoke passed over their heads and exploded in midair.

Then a total of several hundred devices fell down while spinning like bamboo copters.

Needless to say, they were additional smart mines.

If the wind blew just a little, they would probably vanish below the sand.

“Ugh.”

“Could this get any worse?”

The two idiots had to complain.

All their effort over the past several hours had been reduced to nothing, plus their escape route had been cut off.

Part 5

Inside the Baby Magnum's cockpit, the Princess was irritated.

For once, her role was not to defeat an Object or to win a battle. This was the entrance to the home countries of the Capitalist Corporations and the Information Alliance, so the enemy was simply too powerful for that. The more she stood out, the more enemy reinforcements she would summon. Even the extraordinary firepower of an Object was no exception there.

She had to get close but not too close.

She was shaking up the Second Generation guarding the oasis and maintaining a stalemate. She had to keep the situation stable and unchanging and that perfect balance was her top priority.

This was of course a necessary role.

If the enemy Object ignored the Baby Magnum and focused on its surroundings, the hundreds of infantry crawling along the minefield would be blown to Valhalla in no time. The soldiers could not have appreciated anything more than having the enemy Object kept far away from them.

She understood that, but that was not the same as liking it.

(I want to go help Quenser and the others already.)

An Object could take a nuclear blast, so it could clear a minefield in an instant just by moving across it. That was the simplest solution, so it was wrong for the flesh-and-blood soldiers to be sweating bullets and risking their lives clearing the mines.

But despite her thoughts…

"Princess, leave your thinking until later. Maintaining that balance is what matters now. In a way, you need to view this mission as even more difficult than normal."

“Understood, Frolaytia.”

She focused on the battle again.

The Capitalist Corporations Second Generation was known as the Antlion. As its name suggested, it was specialized for combat in the desert. In addition to the static electricity float directly below the spherical body, it had four arms attached to the top. They drove thick stakes into the soft sand to grab at the ground and pull the main body along for powerful short dashes in any direction.

But something else left the biggest impression.

“…?”

In addition to a rapid-fire beam main cannon on the right, it scattered a hail of something from the left.

The Princess took high-speed evasive action while opening a new window for analysis. The projectiles seemed to be tripods several meters long. They were a single spear when fired, but they would open up in midair so they could set themselves up on the ground. They looked something like the pyramid-shaped barricades made of metal bars that prevented parachute descents.

Then something changed.

There was movement, but not from the Baby Magnum or the Antlion. Everything else moved. The sea of sand making up the entire landscape undulated like a living creature. It looked like an area of several kilometers had suddenly turned to quicksand.

Again, the Object’s name was the Antlion.

“We saw that in the control room too,” said Frolaytia. “That’s its unique form of artificial quicksand!!”

“Unknown devices spotted. They’re probably antenna rods used for resonance. I have also detected some very high power HF waves. Unless it’s making sonar-like acoustic scans, it must be vibrating the rods to shake the sand.”

But the Princess was unsure what that mattered as she continued her high-speed battle.

Whether it used static electricity or an air cushion, Objects floated in the air. Even intense quicksand would not swallow them up or even obstruct their movement. This would probably be more frightening than a stormy sea to infantry or tanks, but was it really any use in an Object vs. Object battle?

But just as she was thinking that, something exploded right below the Baby Magnum.

"!?"

Nothing had been fired at her, but she could see new devices in previously empty parts of the wriggling sand. The spherical protrusions were as large as fighter aircraft and they rose and sank within the wriggling desert like a fishing float in the waves. There was no way she would have overlooked them. Which meant…

"Princess, those are mines! The quicksand must have pulled up the equipment they had hidden deep underground!"

"I know that."

Of course, no matter how effective the explosive inside, the mines could not destroy the Baby Magnum. Not even the ultimate nuclear landmine could do that. Objects were built to survive a nuclear attack from any direction, so that was only natural.

But whether it used static electricity or an air cushion, the field that kept the fifty meter two hundred thousand ton Object afloat was delicate. Having a large explosion mess with the repellant was not exactly a good thing.

Even if it was only for a fraction of a second, an opening was an opening.

(Here it comes!!)

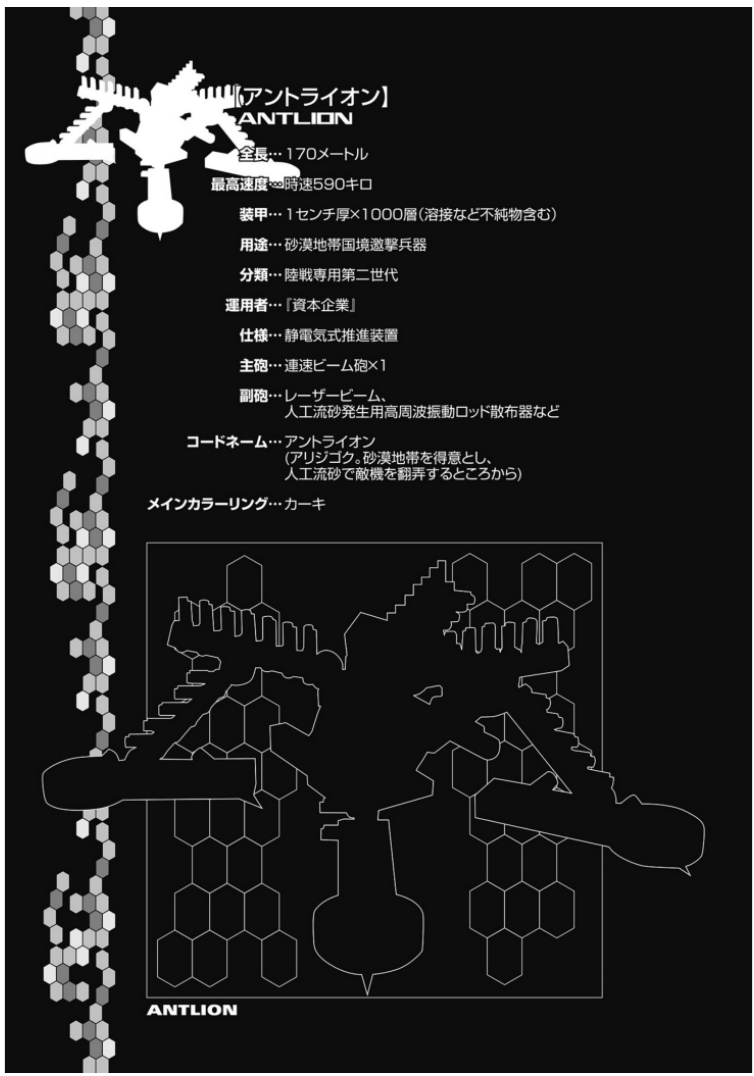
The Princess saw the Antlion's main cannon blast coming from the movements of the cannon itself and its targeting lenses. She

immediately moved her Object far to the right. All the while, the shape of the desert was changing.

An intense cannon blast followed, but she was on a course out of the way.

Nevertheless, the electron beam cannon bent in midair like a snake.

“Wha-…?”



This was entirely unexpected. Time seemed to slow to a stop like when about to collide with an oncoming truck. She instantly figured it out. Electron beams were easily influenced by magnetism. Before firing its main cannon, the Antlion had created artificial quicksand using multiple ultrasonic resonance rods. Targeting her with landmines would be useless.

So what was the true purpose of creating the quicksand?

(Some iron sand was arranged systematically along the surface like a magic circle.)

The Princess gulped.

(And that iron sand cut off or guided the earth's magnetic field so the electron beam would bend on its own!?)

The speed of time returned to normal.

A dreadful blast of fire rushed toward the Baby Magnum.

She could not dodge in time.

The heated onion armor on the left side was peeled up like a giant flower and a storm of alarms filled the cockpit.

Part 6

Moving ahead meant mines and falling back meant mines.

However, they could not sit tight in the middle of the battlefield either.

The Capitalist Corporations forces protecting the oasis where the transport plane had crashed had bared their fangs and the Legitimacy Kingdom was sending in more and more unmanned trucks with shovels on the front.

They could sense the danger just by standing there.

The trucks were fine no matter how many explosions they were caught in, but the mines scattered shrapnel every which way. The cans that were fired a few meters up by springs before exploding were the worst. One of them would scatter small metal balls within a radius of one hundred meters. Every single part of the situation only made it worse. The only welcome aspect was the seductive tears in the (flat-chested) black-haired exposed-forehead Black Uniform's stockings.

Heivia lay on the sand and covered the back of his head with his hands while shouting.

"Are you trying to kill us, you dumbasses!?"

"Get up, Heivia. Let's keep going. This will only get worse otherwise."

"This is no time to play the model soldier! Besides, they're shooting a ton of missiles since we can't use our Object's anti-air lasers. They've already located us! If they wanted to, they could blow us up at any moment!!"

"I'm not so sure." Quenser wiped sweat from his brow. "These are being controlled as a group. I said they were smart mines, right? They can check for the signal to find the layout of the mines and

whether they're alive or dead, so the mine-launching missiles are set to automatically fire where the distribution of mines is thinnest. The oasis is mostly protected by unmanned weapons and the human soldiers aren't all that skilled. They haven't actually located us."

"Got any proof of that!?"

"They can't use thermo when the desert's hotter than our bodies and we can hide from anti-personnel radar behind the sand dunes. And most telling of all, we would have been slaughtered already if they knew where we were."

That list of reassurances was enough for Heivia the sweaty coward to finally calm down. He took a sip of his water bottle's lukewarm contents and slowly stood up.

"Whatever the case, this'll never end if we don't keep moving forward. Looks like this shitty road through hell is our only option."

They traveled through the desert while doing their best to follow the path taken by the armored trucks. That would be safe until new smart mines rained down from the heavens.

Or it should have been.

Nevertheless, something was sticking up from the sand in front of them. The end of the metal pipe had a rotating sprayer attached. On a safe country golf course, they might have thought it was a sprinkler for the lawn.

But this was a battlefield.

Instead of agricultural water, it sprayed out something with an irritant odor included.

"Oh, no."

Quenser and Heivia exchanged a glance and took off running.

A full five seconds later, it happened.

A tremendous explosion filled one corner of the desert.

The mixture of naphtha and detergent ignited and the entire area was remade into a burning hell.

They had just barely made it.

The two idiots escaped beyond the puddle, fell to their butts, and crawled around to keep the embers from falling on them.

“What the hell was that!?”

“The history of flamethrowers is an old one. It goes all the way back to the Ancient Greeks. But modern flamethrowers are well-known for having a metal drum buried underground and spraying out when a faucet is turned.” Quenser slowly let out a breath. “In other words, it’s a landmine.”

“I don’t care about that. I do care about what we’re going to do about our uniforms. A single spark of static could set us on fire. Even my own gun’s muzzle flash could do me in.”

They settled on pouring their water bottles over their heads, but it was obviously not going to help much.

Quenser shook his head like a wet dog and noticed a square piece of concrete nearly buried in the scorching sand. This was the desert, so it would not be a manhole to the sewers. He approached, opened the metal door with both hands, and found a stairway leading down.

“What’s this?”

“Looks pretty amateur to me. This is the entrance to North America, so I bet it’s a drug smuggling tunnel dug by the mafia or a gang.”

An oddly chemical and unhealthy smell wafted out.

Something was lying on the ground inside: several corpses burned black. This was not the result of simply roasting them in a fire. There was some obviously chemical inflammation mixed in.

“That was white phosphorus. Not only do the flames roast the entire person, but breathing in the powder mixed in with the smoke gives

them chemical burns. It must have been a real disaster for these ‘dealers’. There was nowhere to escape in this small tunnel.” Heivia sounded annoyed with it all. “But this underground tunnel could be useful. All the mines up top don’t mean a thing down here. It’d be great if there’s a branch of the tunnel leading toward the oasis.”

“No, wait.”

Quenser was nowhere near as optimistic.

A large drop of sweat dripped down his nose, but he forgot to wipe it away.

“Why are these bodies here?”

“What? Because the criminal organization was wiped out, right?”

“Then wouldn’t the people who burned them know about the tunnel too?” pointed out Quenser. “I don’t know whether it was the Capitalist Corporations or the Information Alliance, but if they knew about this long tunnel under the desert, they could have reused it for a special type of mine.”

“Wait, Quenser.”

He did not have time to answer his awful friend.

He quickly turned around. He saw sand tossed up into the air as dozens of unmanned armored trucks arrived from the maintenance base zone. Quite a few soldiers would be approaching using the path the trucks cleared.

Quenser quickly shouted into his radio.

“This is bad… Really bad!! Stop your approach! You should be able to use vibration sensors or ultrasonic waves to tell where the tunnels are!!”

He received no response.

There was not enough time for one.

The explosives buried in the web of underground tunnels covering a total of 160 kilometers exploded all at once.

Part 7

The belt-shaped explosion could apparently be seen even by civilian satellites.

Part 8

Heaven and earth seemed to swap places, but Quenser immediately resisted the urge to get up.

The smell of smoke filled his chest.

He checked around and saw a wall of fire behind him. He could not tell how far it spread. The wall of fire stretched from horizon to horizon like a strike from a giant's flaming sword.

"Cough, cough… What was it this time?"

"It was almost like a pipeline detonating. There's probably a ten meter deep valley over there. Plus, we have no easy way of crossing that wall of fire."

They were truly cut off now.

They were about four hundred meters from the wall of fire, but scorched hunks of metal were raining down on the desert.

"Here they come," said Heivia as he stared through his rifle scope that was supported by a variety of sensors. "They're apparently going around to mop up the groups that had their escape cut off by the wall of fire. They're actually coming out from the oasis now!"

Quenser could see them too.

They were not human. Instead, they were bull-like silver robots made of military stainless steel. They had likely been developed to provide cover from bullets and to carry heavy weaponry like a golf caddy, but they now had cameras and heavy machineguns attached to their backs. The guns were bestsellers that could blast through a human heart from two thousand meters away and through a cement wall.

"Shit. Even if they can't use thermo or radar, they'll find us if they check behind every dune. I'm not about to die in a spray of 12.7mm bullets. They'd only have a popped water balloon to put in my

coffin.”

“…”

Quenser fell silent and began checking through the burned metal scattered about. He grabbed a large radio that a communications soldier had likely been carrying on their back.

“Help me out, Heivia. Let’s destroy them with a quick research project.”

“How!? They’re robots, so they don’t have brains or hearts. Do you have any idea how many bullets we have to put in them before they’ll stop? And they can move freely through all the smart mines. They can move at 60 kph, so it’s all over once they spot us! Making any kind of move will either mean being blown apart by machinegun fire or a landmine!!”

“Listen.” Quenser tapped the large radio with the back of his hand. “Smart mines have a safety that distinguishes between enemy and ally using IC tags and radio signals, right? If we jam them, they won’t be able to tell who’s with the Capitalist Corporations. They assume the safety is working, so their own mines will blow up their robots. Let’s focus the signal on a single point like a parabolic antenna. Then we can reach them.”

Part 9

Once they tried it, it proved surprisingly easy.

They modified the large radio's antenna so they could essentially point an invisible searchlight wherever they wanted. When they pointed it at the ground below one of the bull-like four-legged robots, the desert would explode amusingly easily. Perhaps because they knew these were not humans, Quenser and Heivia showed no mercy. They detonated the ground below the bulls again and again.

"Wow, it's just like a shooting game."

"That second one from the right's machinegun is broken. It was hit by the blast or the shrapnel. Let's avoid finishing off the damaged ones. We don't have to fear them if they can't fire on us, so let's draw them in as much as we can."

"Why!?"

"Once they approach, we can have them step on all the mines. That'll give us a safe route."

The bulls were as solid as one would expect of weapons placed on the border of their home country. The two idiots lured the few that had survived along a straight path and used the jamming to detonate more and more of the smart mines. They almost looked heroic.

The oasis was three hundred meters away.

At this point, charging into the enemy lines was better than sneaking around. Extra mine-launching missiles automatically fired from the oasis after detecting the lack of mines via radio, but Quenser and Heivia ignored them and rushed down the bulls' path to the oasis.

Until, that is, something much more frightening interrupted.

It was the Antlion and the Baby Magnum.

The two Objects cut across the desert.

All of their assumptions were instantly blown away.

The mines were blown away like firecrackers below the Objects. The entire idea of a minefield was erased. The bulls that had just barely maintained their original forms were finally turned to scrap.

Meanwhile, a creaking came from the countless secondary cannons on one of the four arms the Antlion used to grab at the ground.

It was accurately targeting Quenser and Heivia, those bugs crawling along the ground.

The student's throat dried up.

A moment later, light as pure white as welding stabbed into his eyes.

However, he felt no pain. In fact, the cannon fire had not come from the Antlion at all.

A few of the Antlion's secondary cannons were torn away like melted candy.

Quenser knew only one person who could have done that.

"Princess!?"

He shouted into his radio, but the Baby Magnum was not unharmed. It must have taken a full main cannon hit because its left side had melted like ice cream. She still fired her anti-air lasers to say hi. They destroyed all of the mine-launching missiles meant to scatter smart mines from overhead. Meanwhile, the Antlion had lost its chance to fire. The two Objects left the battlefield and resumed their conflict in a different region of desert.

"This is no time to watch! Get running! If they fire a second or third wave, our safe route could be contaminated by mines!!"

This was their chance, so the two of them took off running.

They desperately calmed their panicking hearts and made their way to the oasis.

The desert was wide open, but they were not interrupted by sniper fire or machine gun barrages. The area really must have been focused on unmanned defenses. Either that or the heavy machineguns on the backs of those remote controlled bulls had been their prized weapons.

Fortunately, no more mine-launching missiles were fired.

They had likely decided they were meaningless with the Object around.

The two idiots dove into the sunflower field surrounding the oasis.

“This is terrible.”

The sunflowers were taller than Quenser and they were so thick they created a natural curtain. They had stepped in together, but he could no longer see Heivia.

“I can’t even see even two meters in front of me. Not even jungle battles are this bad.”

“Heivia. Hey, Heivia!”

The student quietly called for his awful friend, but the other boy’s voice only grew more distant.

They could still contact each other over the radio, but that would not help them meet back up since there were no landmarks. But he could not stay where he was, so he decided to continue toward the crashed plane that was their original objective.

It was stuffy and hot inside the sunflower field.

The humidity was unpleasantly high.

He parted the sunflowers on his own. The stalks had something like small hairs on them and they painfully scratched at his cheeks. He grimaced and then noticed the sinister silhouette of a scorpion at

eye level on one stalk.

“Wah!?”

(Animal contamination!? Does that mean there are tons of spiders and snakes here too!?)

But he did not have time to be afraid of every little thing.

He heard a few gunshots muffled by a silencer. Quenser covered his mouth with his hands and crouched down on the spot. The bullets must have hit them because the leaves and stalks of nearby sunflowers were crushed, producing a grassy smell.

(A silencer? Dammit, Heivia didn’t have one of those!!)

He had let out a shout, but the enemy soldier had not shot him through the head or heart.

It was obvious what that meant.

(They’re nearby, but the barrier of moisture-filled sunflowers is deflecting their anti-personnel radar waves. They can only make a general guess at which direction to fire!!)

If he moved, the sound of parting the sunflowers would give away his position.

Just like the sounds he could hear moving right toward him.

His heart pounded in his chest and his mind focused on the Hand Axe plastic explosive in his backpack, but he would be caught in the blast too when this close. He thought for a bit and then reached for a pen-sized electric fuse in the pouch on his waist.

A moment later, unfamiliar boots stepped out thirty centimeters in front of him.

“……

He felt dizzy.

He was only a student, so he could not defeat a strong soldier in close-quarters combat. The advantage of a surprise attack would barely matter. A knife being more powerful than a gun at close range was only true in the movies, so he did not have the guts to face that soldier who held a carbine.

That was why Quenser relied on something else.

He tossed the fuse over without using any explosive. He threw it to the base of a sunflower near the enemy rather than the enemy himself.

It was the one with a sinister scorpion on it.

He immediately hit the switch on his radio. A blast louder than a firecracker broke the stalk and the giant flower fell toward the enemy soldier's face. As did the venomous stinger.

"Bwaah!?"

As the enemy soldier swung his arms and legs around and made a lot of noise, Quenser snuck past him while still crouching. He did not need to rush. Slowly moving through the sunflowers was best.

A moment later, he heard a metallic sound.

He felt a squeezing in his heart when he saw a different carbine pointing toward his head through a gap in the sunflower curtain. There had been more than one enemy soldier.

And the gun did indeed have a silencer attached.

A wet sound followed.

However, it was not the sound of the student's brains splattering on the sunflowers.

After sneaking up behind the enemy soldier, Heivia held his mouth with a hand and slit this throat with a large knife.

"Of course they aren't going to send out just one guy on a patrol. Use your head a little."

“It hadn’t been long since we got separated, so I assumed you would show up after hearing the fuse detonate.”

“Yeah, but the enemy will have heard it too. C’mon, let’s go.”

Heivia tossed aside the unmoving corpse and Quenser borrowed the silencer-equipped carbine before following.

“You’re not going to use that, so it’ll just get in the way.”

“It’s like a good-luck charm. Do you have any idea what it’s like to walk along the front lines without a gun?”

They carefully walked through the sunflower field when enemy soldiers or venomous creatures could be hiding anywhere. The constant green curtain made it easy to lose their sense of direction if they stopped paying attention.

“There aren’t any mines here, I see.”

“Mines don’t mix well with plant roots. Roots can lift up asphalt in some cases, right? They can trigger explosions, reduce the sensitivity, or whatever else.”

They were still worried about wire traps, but they never ran across any.

The sunflower field suddenly ended.

Instead of happening naturally, it looked like a line had been torn away in the donut-shaped field surrounding the oasis itself. The green curtain was torn up over a width of about fifty meters. This was the crash site, but there was no intact transport plane. It had split into three large hunks of metal and smaller pieces and wreckage were scattered everywhere.

Yellow tape cordoned off the area and plates with letters written on them were placed on the ground. Men in Capitalist Corporations uniforms were still working near the three major pieces of the wreckage. There were about ten per piece.

The two idiots crouched down right inside the edge of the

sunflower curtain and discussed the situation.

“Where do you think the plane’s pilots are?”

“There’s no way they survived a crash like that. They’ll have been blown to bits. That busty commander must have realized we’d be more motivated if we thought they might still be alive.”

“Then what’s the Capitalist Corporations so busy searching for?”

“How should I know? We have no idea what was onboard or why it was shot down.”

This was not the world of a moving war movie, so they had no real attachment to colleagues they had never met. They would do their job, but they would also complain about it.

They argued some more, but there was no reason for them to actually defeat the Capitalist Corporations here. In fact, the enemy could send in an inexhaustible supply of reinforcements with their home country so close by. Trying to defeat them was wasted effort. If the pilots were dead, they could complete their mission by taking photos of the corpses to have evidence of their deaths.

But…

“Do you think we can slip past all those soldiers?”

“Let’s start with what we can get at. God, what a pain. In the end, it’s human eyes standing in our way.”

Fortunately, there was quite a bit of wreckage scattered about. There were three main pieces, but small container or car-sized pieces were everywhere. Heivia left the sunflowers in a crouch and Quenser followed. They approached a nearby dented metal container.

“Why couldn’t there be topless girls waiting at our destination? Instead it’s some mangled corpses. Can’t someone find something to give me some motivation?”

“Wait a second. What is this container?”

Quenser looked to the piece of wreckage they were using as cover. It was an air cargo container shaped like a two meter die and it was made of aluminum to cut down on the weight. The crash had blown the door off, so they could easily peek inside.

It was not carrying weapons, ammunition, rations, or even an officer's condoms.

It was divided into layers by metal racks and it contained an ultraviolet light meant to replace the sun and a small air conditioner meant to keep the temperature stable. The glittering silver box had plants growing inside it.

"A plant factory?" Quenser frowned. "But why? I've heard they can get more than twenty-six harvests a year by changing the wavelength of the light, but growing plants in place of rations has to be terribly inefficient."

"That's not what this is. …This is bad, Quenser."

Heivia stepped inside the container and reached for the wheat growing on top of a large plate on one of the metal racks.

However, the color was strange. The heads seemed to be surrounded by hard purple shells and they had swollen one size larger than normal. Even an agricultural amateur could tell this was some kind of plant disease.

"These are ergots. Unless this was an accident, the plant was intentionally infected. And how would it accidentally get infected inside a perfectly sealed container?"

"Wait, you mean…?"

Quenser's eyes widened as he finally caught on.

Heivia looked annoyed.

"The ergot alkaloids extracted from these are used to make the ever-famous LSD. This is mass-producing some life-ruining stuff that even the people taking dangerous drugs and herbs are afraid to touch. I think it's called Colorful Vanilla these days."

“Why? Because the drug smells like vanilla?”

“No, because it gets you so high even pure white vanilla is filled with psychedelic colors.” The delinquent noble spat out the words while spinning his index finger next to his head. “Haven’t you heard of the Capitalist Corporations’ Home Treatment Proposal? There are so many addicts that the hospitals and prisons are about to burst at the seams, so this reckless new rule would greatly relax the standards for who can be treated at home. They’ll be attaching GPS devices to their ankles, but they’re really just leaving the addicts to their own devices. No one can know when some hallucinating bastard will attack people on the streets or go on a mass shooting. One of the world powers is on the verge of succumbing to a drug.”

“But if the ingredient for that Whatever Vanilla just showed up in a Legitimacy Kingdom transport plane…”

“Yeah.”

Heivia paused before continuing.

“Our idiots have gotten involved in a drug war. This was no coincidence. We’ve been performing an invisible carpet bombing of the enemy’s home country, goddammit.”

Part 10

Meanwhile in the maintenance base zone, Frolaytia Capistrano quietly slipped out of the command room.

Once in the hallway, she pulled out a handheld device, made a few operations with her fingertip, and then heard a voice from the side.

It was Lieutenant Meena Stinger of Special Platoon 15.

“Is something wrong, major?”

“Yes.”

Frolaytia halted her work and put the device in her pocket.

Nothing good would come from letting the Black Uniforms know she was setting up a communications route that circumvented the military’s monitoring. No matter what her reasons, they would strictly compare her actions to the military regulations and punish her.

“We’ve received an unpleasant report from the intelligence division. Not that they often send us any cheerful news.”

“Heh heh. As a Black Uniform, I think I know what you mean.”

A look of curiosity flashed behind Meena’s glasses and she urged Frolaytia to continue.

“If telling me would not violate security policies…”

“Of course.”

Frolaytia nodded, crossed her arms such that they lifted her breasts, and leaned against the hallway wall.

“I’ll omit the details, but the term ‘drug war’ is starting to show up.”

“Oh, my.”

Simply put, a drug war was when the military or government (instead of a gang or the mafia) led the production, synthesis, and selling of drugs. That was of course not permitted as an official strategy, but rumor had it every world power was doing something similar.

Some said it was to contaminate enemy safe countries without the international criticism that came from bombs or poison gas.

Some said the drugs were sold even to their own people to make money.

“A military commentator once laughed in front of the camera and said it was meaningless to develop Objects and strategic weapons to destroy the enemy home country. He said it would be faster to open a national restaurant chain that sells the kind of greasy burgers that invite in the grim reaper of adult diseases. But this drug war is far crueler than some joke.”

“I know exactly what you mean, major.” Meena slowly breathed out. “That is exactly where our specialty lies. I apologize for being so rude before, but surprise inspections are essential to deal with that kind of drug war.”

“I understand. If white powder and rock candy are hidden inside handheld games and electric guitars, the military’s transport routes can be used for their delivery business. I allowed the inspection because I understand that, lieutenant.”

“Thank you for your cooperation.” Meena obediently bowed. “The higher ups do not understand how frightening a drug war truly is. I will not name any names, but some officers seem to view it as a necessary evil. Unfortunately, they seem to have trouble imagining that shifting the stage of war from the battlefield countries to the safe countries will also expose themselves and their families to the threat of drugs.”

“They probably innocently believe that their kids are geniuses and angels who will always succeed and never step out of line. All the while, they have no idea those drugs are advertised differently depending on the target’s status, complexes, and personality. Maybe

they're good for your looks or for dieting. Maybe they make you smarter or a better studier. Maybe they make you better at sports or fighting. Maybe they help you overcome your anxiety or make you popular."

"But once they've been told there's an upside, it can be very hard to stop them, major."

"The merits of a drug war, hm?"

"I've heard it all. One, the military or government can interfere in the market run by the gangs and mafia to destroy any value in it and control the amounts being distributed. Two, it applies indirect damage to the enemy safe countries that can't be directly attacked. In other words, it increases the crime rate, breeds mistrust of the government, and destroys promising youths who would otherwise have done great things in the future. Three, unlike other weapons, a drug war brings in more money the longer it continues. …Military action is an economic action, so they like the idea of something that actually makes money."

"So it's an issue of profit, is it? I'm sure those bigshots in the safe countries are only thinking about number three."

If war was viewed as an economic activity, then every weapon and unit had a cost to use. Not just each bullet fired, but each day's worth of food cost money. So the longer war continued, the greater the losses. Even if the war was won, the world's rules declared it a failure if they did not gain something of greater value than the expenses. In some cases, troops would be ordered to withdraw even though those troops were in a prime position to rout the enemy.

But the drug war actually made money the longer it continued. It was like alchemy. It was a supernatural form of economics that completely ignored the law of conservation of whatever. It was a truly delicious cost-benefit calculation for the desk workers who only saw reality in the progression of a line graph.

Of course, drugs wars looked bad, so no state or military would officially adopt that strategy. But just like the big bang theory, this theory was about as close to proven as a theory could get.

Frolaytia sighed in exasperation and intentionally changed the subject.

“By the way, lieutenant.”

“Yes?”

“You were rummaging around everything for that inspection, so maybe you know something about this. …Thirty-two white phosphorous incendiary grenades – a box’s worth – have gone missing. Any idea where they might have gone?”

“No. We can perform a search if necessary, but that would be a lot of trouble.”

“Yes.” Frolaytia gave an annoyed click of her tongue. “White phosphorous is completely unnecessary to cross a minefield, so if a soldier wanted to grab some extra gear to give them an edge, they would have gone for something else. …One of the soldiers on this mission might be planning to use that white phosphorous to erase something.”

“That transport plane?”

“It seems likely the Capitalist Corporations really did shoot it down, but it was an obviously forceful move. That means they had a good reason for doing so.”

“Something that could prove the existence of a drug war? In other words, something that could be hidden with white phosphorous?”

“Since the incendiary grenades vanished from here, it unfortunately means someone on that mission is planning exactly that.”

“This is serious.”

“The biggest problem is the lack of any real evidence.”

Frolaytia was using the term “drug war”, but she had not mentioned a specific drug. That was the extent of the information her intelligence network could find.

The final piece of the puzzle would be at that crash site.

That would be the Achilles' heel for whoever was leading the drug war. That was why this forceful rescue operation had been suggested and carried out. If the evidence was turned to ash, they would walk brazenly through the world once more. They would continue their drug war. They would boldly say military action was bringing harm to others for their own country's benefit and they would ask why swapping the bullets for white powder made a difference. After all, it had always been internationally acceptable for a military to harm others.

They would attack the enemy nation with drugs.

They would limit the amount entering their own country and direct it all to the enemy nation.

They would shield their own people and strike at the enemy.

Frolaytia truly grimaced as she thought through the justifications they would likely use. If a drug war was alchemy, then words were magic. Use them properly, and good could become evil or vice-versa.

"I want to end this here, no matter what it takes."

"Yes."

But they still had no definite proof.

Having the entire unit fall back because they were all suspects was not an option. If they did not get their hands on the evidence at the crash site, they could not end the drug war.

It felt like having poison mixed in with an immortality drug.

Frolaytia reached for her bangs with a look of annoyance.

"No, I will end this here."

Part 11

The two idiots grew pale behind the die-shaped air cargo container.

“This changes everything,” groaned Heivia. “I wasn’t stupid enough to believe we were fighting for justice, but is this for real? So the Capitalist Corporations are fighting to keep Colorful Vanilla out of their country and we were sent out to erase the evidence that we’re supporting that business? What the hell!?”

“I don’t like it either. I think I’m gonna have nightmares for a while, even if I confess this to a priest.”

“I wouldn’t, since you’ll just get you and the priest blown away in the name of protecting classified information. If you need a change of pace, then go to a strip club instead.”

“Hey, do you think Frolaytia was involved in this drug war?”

“If so, she’d never have agreed to the Blue Rose’s surprise visit or the Black Uniforms’ surprise inspection. Would you want to hold a cookout on the mountain you just buried a corpse in? Even if your friends were planning it, you’d start gathering beach pamphlets, put on your best smile, and try to get them to change their plans. I doubt she knew a thing.”

“So she’s innocent. That’s good at least.”

“More importantly, what do we do now? We can’t let some idiot continue making money in the worst possible way, like it’s a fishy sort of FX trading.”

Quenser used his handheld device’s lens to take photos of the container number and the purple ergots growing on the wheat inside. He also gathered a few seeds in a bag, but he looked worried.

“Will this really work as evidence? How long has it been since the crash? There’s only this wheat inside the container. If we show this

as proof, someone's sure to suggest the ergot fungus spread to the wheat from the oasis. They'll say this doesn't prove the Legitimacy Kingdom was involved. It'll be just like the investigation after a suicide brought on by bullying or overwork. When everyone prefers for there to be no connection, the report can be twisted however they want!!"

"But the mastermind couldn't just abandon this stuff. That's why they had us risk our necks on that minefield for this phony rescue operation. They must have felt they couldn't let the Capitalist Corporations or Information Alliance get this stuff."

"But why?"

"…"

Quenser thought on their conversation for a bit and then caught on.

"Heivia, you said they'll ignore this by claiming the wheat in the container was infected by ergot fungus at the crash site, right?"

"Yeah. What about it?"

"Ergot fungus is alive, so it has genes made from DNA and RNA. If we take this back and let a lab look at it, they can tell what region it came from. At the very least, they can tell it didn't grow at this oasis."

"So they can't make that excuse anymore? Are you saying we can prove they were growing dangerous ergot-infested wheat in the container from the beginning!?"

They knew what they had to do.

They also knew the obstacles would grow the closer they got to their goal.

A voice reached them over the radio.

"Quenser, Heivia! Are you alive!? We had some trouble with that wall of fire that cut us off, but we're resuming our advance. Don't die yet and see you at the oasis!!"

“Goddammit! Who knows who our enemy is here! We need to protect this container!”

“No, let’s abandon it. As long as we have a few pieces of the wheat, we can get the ergots analyzed. If they blow up the container, the mastermind will rejoice and let their guard down. And I want to see who goes for the container first. That will lead us to who’s behind this.”

“Yeah, yeah. Let’s do that. By the way, what about the Capitalist Corporations? We’ve already killed a fair number, but I don’t really want to make more corpses now.”

They peered over at the transport plane’s wreckage again.

Even now, they were relying on their unmanned weaponry, so most of them were here. They were likely monitoring the situation and would know it was growing worse for them, but they may have decided cutting off the supply of Colorful Vanilla was more important than their own lives. It was possible some of them had family or a lover back in their home country.

They were the border patrol.

They were meant to risk their lives as they kept the dangers of the battlefield countries from entering their home country.

Quenser thought for a moment before speaking.

“Heivia, can you speak in a Capitalist Corporations accent? It has to sound native or it won’t work.”

What they had to do was simple.

Quenser and Heivia fell back to the sunflowers, stuck fuses in Hand Axe plastic explosive, and threw it all around.

Then they used the silencer-equipped carbine they had stolen from the Capitalist Corporations soldier. They pulled out a single rifle round, crushed the lead bullet portion with a pair of pliers, and reloaded it.

They fired into the air. Most of the bursting sound was absorbed, so only the sharp whistle-like noise of the crushed bullet tearing through the air rang out.

After a few seconds, Quenser hit his radio's switch.

As the sunflower field was torn apart again and again, Heivia shouted at the top of his lungs.

"Legitimacy Kingdom mortars!! Once this area's been levelled, their main force is coming. Fall back! Fall back to the shelter immediately!!"

Thinking explosives were raining from the sky, a stir ran through the Capitalist Corporations soldiers. They began to move. A few were reluctant at first, but the other soldiers grabbed their arms and fled.

"This would make any pacifist shed tears of joy. From now on, today shall be known as St. Heivia's Day."

"Don't let your guard down yet. We need to hide and see what happens. Who's going to go for the container before-…?"

He trailed off.

"Heivia, you're all right!? That was one hell of an explosion just now!"

It was their (supposed) allies from the Legitimacy Kingdom. The noble boy let out a sigh and gave up. He casually removed his assault rifle's sensors and military battery and dropped them to his feet. Then he joined the other soldiers with a smile on his face.

However, those soldiers had not called Quenser's name.

They had not seen him.

He crouched down, took the gun accessories, and held onto the silencer-equipped carbine as he slowly slipped further back into the curtain of sunflowers. He heard a rustling just five meters ahead of him and the (flat-chested) black-haired exposed-forehead Black

Uniform appeared on the crash site. He knew she would not be carless enough to wear perfume on the battlefield, but a different sort of sweet feminine aroma wafted his way. That was just how close she was. The tension squeezed painfully at his heart, but fortunately, he had not been found.

(Who will it be?)

The container was only one hundred meters away, but he attached the extra equipment to the carbine and observed the scene through the scope.

(Who will go for the container first!?)

Heivia walked through the crash site. The surrounding soldiers groaned when they saw the mowed down sunflowers and the crashed plane split into three parts. They all focused on the cockpit because their official objective was to rescue the pilots.

However, one person was focused elsewhere.

They were sneaking further looks around the area without focusing on the wreckage of the plane.

When they spotted something, they casually walked away from the rest of the unit. They traced their fingers along the surface of the die-shaped air cargo container that Quenser and Heivia had used as a shield before.

Quenser's mind went blank.

For a moment, he had no idea what was going on.

(You've gotta be kidding me… The Black Uniforms Special Platoon 15!?)

It was the one with a relatively flat chest for her age.

The one with the trademark forehead showing between her long black hair.

There was nothing anyone could have done. It was like having the

airport's drug-sniffing dog tamed by a toy bone and some pet food. If the inspection system was not functioning, they could run their drug war without worrying about a thing. Those young women had performed the inspection themselves so they could ignore the bag of white powder hidden in a corner of the container. Once they stamped it "checked", "safe", or "passed", no one would suspect a thing.

But this was no time to be lamenting the corruption of those supposedly well-behaved people.

The black-haired Black Uniform was running her fingers along the container. No, she was measuring something with her fingers. As a combat engineer, Quenser realized she was judging where to place explosives. And when he saw what she pulled out, he silently groaned.

(White phosphorous of all things!?)

They were white phosphorous incendiary grenades.

They were famous for producing intense heat while also spreading toxic chemical-filled smoke. It was to the point that everyone tended to tilt their heads and wonder why it was not classified as a poison gas weapon.

Quenser recalled the burned corpses by that tunnel's stairs. Not only did those grenades scatter sticky flames, but the powder mixed in with the smoke would destroy the human body when breathed in. Anyone hit by the stuff would writhe around as it covered their body like melted chocolate and their lungs would grow too inflamed to breath properly. That hell would last for a few dozen seconds to around a dozen minutes. And once they were hit, there was no saving them. It was truly a dance of death.

Quenser checked the wind through the scope and found the other soldiers would be caught in the blast. Plus, there was more than just the one member of the Special 15th. He moved his carbine's scope around and saw suspicious figures near seven or eight air cargo containers.

If they all used white phosphorous, all of the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers at the crash site could be swallowed up. Without even having to breath it in, the chemical- filled smoke would wipe them all out just from contacting their skin.

(No, slaughtering us is actually convenient for them. With none of the Capitalist Corporations soldiers around, they can't disguise burning the containers as part of the battle. It would seem unnatural if incendiary grenades went off here, so they'll get rid of all the witnesses. If none of us can speak, the Special 15th can give any report they want. They'll just say they were attacked by the Capitalist Corporations!)

He checked Heivia's face through the scope. He could not make eye contact from this distance, but the boy seemed to be glancing back this way at times. He had probably also noticed the Special 15th going for the containers. However, there was nothing he could do. If he suddenly aimed his gun at the Black Uniforms without explaining the situation, he would be seen as the dangerous one.

Quenser was the only one free to protect them all.

He had to stop them from igniting those white phosphorous incendiary grenades, even if it meant sniping every last one of the Special 15th.

But…

(Can I do that?)

At this point, he was not about to question the morality of killing someone.

He had cutting-edge military equipment with plenty of guidance by sensors, but he was used to using explosives. He had never been trained in using a carbine.

(There are allies all over the place. If I miss, who knows where the stray bullet will fly. And the Black Uniforms might panic and pull the pin on the white phosphorous. Can I really do this? Even if this is a semiauto, there are eight of them. They're everywhere from one

hundred to four hundred meters away. Can I really snipe each one in turn without any one of them moving their fingers in the confusion?)

He was breathing heavily.

He felt faint.

He knew what he had to do, but a strange weight pressed down on him. He could not bring himself to actually take action. He knew the conditions for success would only grow more severe as time passed, but he still could not.

And then…

“Honestly, what a useless gentleman. Let me see that.”

The scent of rosy perfume stood out in the grassy smell of the sunflower field.

The next thing he knew, a hand had reached in and grabbed the carbine from him.

The action was done so naturally that he found himself simply watching.

A girl crouched on one knee next to him.

She had a golden cascade of hair, white skin, and a dazzlingly blue dress that looked out of place on the battlefield. As she peered through the scope, she did not use a military technique meant for killing human beings. She instead used the hunter’s stance of a noble who wished to elegantly pursue her prey.

But then she looked puzzled.

“What is all this additional junk? …Honestly, this is only in the way.”

She removed and tossed aside the Legitimacy Kingdom accessories that Quenser had added on. Only then did she peer through the scope again.

She boldly raised her jaw, yet her skin was so pale it almost looked sickly.

She moved her lips while staring at her prey and not him.

“I do not require a spotter either. Inexperienced advice would only trip me up.”

That was her cue.

Four hundred meters away, the head of a Black Uniform neatly jerked to the side. She had gone for the most distant target first. The bullet had passed right by Heivia and their many other allies. From there, she shot the remaining targets in order of decreasing difficulty. Even if it was a semiauto weapon, there was only a gap of about a second between shots. The movement would have been impossible without using the recoil of each shot to shift her aim to the next target.

But rather than a great feat, she made it look easy.

It was like a scene from a Western or a samurai film. It felt like the stage had already been set for this exact resolution and she was simply approaching the conclusion.

In no time at all, only one target remained.

It was the flat-chested young woman with her trademark forehead showing between her long black hair.

She was caught off guard and looking in the wrong direction entirely. As the Special 15th woman moved her trembling lips to mutter something, a carbine bullet mercilessly pierced the side of her head.

“Even a wild rabbit would struggle to live more than this. How boring.”

Finally, the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers notice the sniper fire and acted like they had poked a hornet's nest. But the girl in the blue dress was not worried. She shoved the carbine back into Quenser's hands, slowly stood from her crouching position, and used a hand to brush back the golden cascade of her hair.

"This is merely a portion of *noblesse oblige*, so you need not thank me. It is a noble's duty to reach out a helping hand to a wandering commoner."

“Who…are you?”

“Oh, right. This is technically a surprise visit, isn’t it? I assumed that was only an excuse for the press and that everyone here would already know.”

That phrase resurrected a memory.

Could it be?

“I am Azureyfear Winchell.”

Just before vanishing into the sunflower field again, she looked back.

The pale-skinned girl in the middle of the desert battlefield provided another name.

“Or as a commoner, perhaps you would know me as the Blue Rose of Winchell.”

Part 12

In the middle of the desert, both the Baby Magnum and the Antlion were badly damaged.

The two Objects glared at each other even as portions of their armor were melting like ice cream.

The Princess had been listening to her allies over the radio, so she had a general understanding of the situation.

It was a bit of a violation of military regulations, but she spoke over an open bandwidth.

“I won this.”

“Like hell you did. I was twelve moves away from an absolute victory.”

“If I had fired my low-stability plasma cannon at the sand to turn the entire surface to glass, I could have negated your quicksand tactics.”

“Did you know I was taking advantage of your static electricity repellant that had soaked into the sand? If I sent the quicksand in to stir up the sand below you, your Object would have come to a complete stop for five whole seconds. I could have fired my main cannon twice in that time.”

“…”

“…”

A short silence followed, but the Princess finally raised her hands and responded.

“Sorry about all the trouble. (Bow)”

“That’s more like it. Your Legitimacy Kingdom started this drug war by sending Colorful Vanilla into the Capitalist Corporations. I’m not

about to let that Home Treatment Proposal happen. If you don't investigate this and deal with it, it'll be a real war next time."

Part 13

After finally receiving a report from the battlefield by radio, Frolaytia let out a quiet sigh.

She left the command room, walked down the hall, and left the large vehicle. She lit her long, narrow kiseru with a match and her eyes met those of Black Uniform Special Platoon 15's Lieutenant Meena Stinger.

"Hello, lieutenant. I could never say this in front of them, but it's nice when they understand what I would want without being told. I have some excellent subordinates."

"What are you-…?"

"On the other hand, *your* foolish subordinates failed. We safely retrieved the containers. My men have even suggested a way to use the ergot-infested wheat inside. It seems the ergot fungus can be identified from its genes, so a lab can confirm the infected wheat was grown inside the container and not infected from the oasis after the crash. …So it was Colorful Vanilla, was it? I've heard rumors that it's reached nearly a third of their home country's population. If the Capitalist Corporations leaders had passed that Home Treatment Proposal, it very well might have been a victory for the history books. Although it would have been there as a blot on the Legitimacy Kingdom's honor."

"…"

"Oh, and don't bother confiscating it after rewriting the report to say the 37th was creating the Colorful Vanilla. We may have traveled around the globe for our various mission, but a test on the ergot fungus will tell us all where it came from. If it isn't anywhere the 37th has been, we can easily clear up all suspicion."

"…"

"And, lieutenant, I'm sure the Special 15th has traveled around the

globe as well, but I hope that wouldn't happen to match the origin of that ergot fungus. If it did, you could be in trouble. You'd be bringing unneeded suspicion onto yourself."

"……

The next thing Frolaytia knew, Meena Stinger's face was covered in sweat. She was trembling and unable to move. Her previous confidence had vanished and she could no longer smile as she verbally sparred with the other woman.

"You understand nothing…"

"That's just like asking 'did you know'. There's no way I'll understand if that's all you say. And do I really need to understand this? I'm quite busy, you see. Although I doubt it will be anywhere near as busy as you with the inevitable military investigation, court martial, press conference, and tearful parents."

"Didn't I tell you, major? The Special 15th specializes in the drug war. This is not a one-way fight. Just because one side puts down their gun does not mean the other side will. They will simply pull the trigger on you. If the Special 15 withdraws from the drug war, the product circulating the world like blood will not just vanish."

Meena was breathing and sweating heavily.

She may have been arguing her case to an angel only she could see.

"Colorful Vanilla is the lysergic acid psychedelic that has worked its way into a third of the Capitalist Corporations' home country's population. The number of addicts has grown so rapidly that the hospitals and prisons can't keep up. If the Home Treatment Proposal being discussed by 7th Core is enacted, it will be effectively legalized and pull the trigger on an international moral hazard. … But that isn't all."

"…"

"Narcotics, stimulants, psychotropics, organic paint, and plant and animal toxins. Major, do you know just how many products are circulating this world? We have 405 varieties registered in our

database alone and that number grows more than tenfold if you include the variations from designer drugs and selectively bred herbs. Just like cyber warfare, if we do not constantly update our database to deal with the viruses changing and evolving on a daily basis, we will be the next ones under attack."

"But has a security company ever created a virus themselves and spread it to their customers? Oh, and spare me the ridiculous urban legends about spreading viruses to increase their sales."

"Don't joke. Lose control and the distortions of the world would rush to the Legitimacy Kingdom. What you have done is the same as shutting down the firewall protecting the country. You have saved the Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance while infecting the Legitimacy Kingdom women and children."

"Oh, now we're going the ever-popular 'women and children' route, are we? The military and the government love using that one when they're in a bind. And when that doesn't work, you'll probably start placing the sick and the elderly on the chopping block. But I'm sorry to say the faucet to my tear glands seems to be made a bit tighter than average. If you want to bring me to tears, you're going to need a great masterpiece on the level of Shakespeare."

"The drug war is just one gear in the giant contraption known as the military. Major Capistrano, you insist it is some distant gear, but you cannot ignore it when the music box connected to it begins playing. For one thing, the funds we have raised do not enter our own pockets. The destination has been obfuscated via a series of bank accounts, but it all leads back to-…"

She was unable to complete her complaint.

The next action came from an entirely different direction.

Meena Stinger's head blurred to the side as if she had been hit by an invisible hammer.

A flower of blood blossomed.

A few small drops reached the busty silver-haired commander's

cheek.

Before wiping it off, her body moved on reflex.

Before the Black Uniform could completely fall to the hot sand like a broken doll, Frolaytia hid behind the giant vehicle. She held her breath behind a tire taller than she was.

(A sniper? But where!?)

The maintenance base zone seemed built to move anywhere in the world using the large vehicles, but they actually paid careful attention to where they positioned the more than one hundred vehicles. The area around the command room in particular had a large number of vehicles around it to supposedly cut off any line of fire.

Except…

(It's a lot like threading a needle…but there is a path.)

She gulped.

(But they would have to be 1500 meters away. How skilled a sniper would you need to take wind and gravity into account, slip through the slight gap between vehicles, and accurately hit the lieutenant's head at that range!?)

Part 14

On his way back with Heivia and the others, something seemed strange to Quenser.

That girl in the blue dress.

Azureyfear Winchell.

The Blue Rose of Winchell.

She had saved him, but now that he thought about it, it was odd.

He was willing to set aside how she had shown up on the front line with the Capitalist Corporations. Something else bothered him even more.

How had she known who the target was?

Everyone at that crash site had been wearing the Legitimacy Kingdom uniform. Azureyfear had not known the situation, so they should have all looked like allies. Quenser had only realized who the true enemy was after checking the inside of the container, concluding the Legitimacy Kingdom was trying to erase the evidence they were involved in a drug war, and seeing who went for the containers growing the ergots used to make Colorful Vanilla.

However, the Blue Rose had made the judgment immediately.

She had omitted all that work and instantly caught up to Quenser's understanding.

And without him telling her anything.

(No…)

"I guess that isn't possible."

"Hm? What is it, Quenser?"

“Nothing.”

“By the way, you did a hell of a job back there. Even if it was at short- to mid-range, you shot all eight of them in a row. See, you can do it if you try! Then again, the credit really goes to me for handing you those Legitimacy Kingdom accessories when it really mattered! Hah hah hah!!”

“Ha ha ha…”

The boy laughed weakly at what his awful friend said.

That was not possible.

It could not have been that.

Part 15

On a dry sand dune, a pale girl with blue eyes and a blue dress removed an anti-materiel rifle from her eye.

The hunter whispered to herself with a thin, thin smile on her lips.

“Even a wild rabbit would struggle to live more than this. How boring.”

Chapter 2: Elusive Financial Source > > Ice Breaking Bombardment at Africa's Cape of Good Hope

Part 1

A structure floated oddly on the lead-colored ocean.

It was somewhere between five and ten meters long and it was spherical in shape, but it oddly did not roll as it was shaken between the waves. The hatch remained on the top at all times and the porthole on the side remained in the same spot.

It was a type of lifeboat.

It had plenty of emergency supplies, communications equipment, a heater, and even a generator making use of the current and the wind. As opposed to something prepared on a ship, it was more of a product for the wealthy disaster-prepper.

Inside that cradle were three blonde girls with red military uniforms meant for parades.

They each had a different hairstyle, but their identical faces made it clear they were triplets.

Alisa Martini Sweet.

Rica Martini Medium.

Orsia Martini Dry.

They were all genius girls created by the Information Alliance's Project Whiz Kid. It would be hard to find a more severe upbringing in any of the four world powers, but the girls themselves barely seemed to care. They elegantly grabbed tea cakes and reached for the cups inside the round boat.

Instead of coffee or tea, the cups contained an energy drink full of caffeine and other stimulants that was "kind to the body in its lack of sugar, yet somehow unsatisfying". That showed the Information Alliance side of things most of all.

"A-are you sure this is safe? We left the fleet a long time ago and

we’re just floating out here on the ocean with no one to protect us.”

The young man in charge of their care was sweating bullets.

Alisa, the triplet with the largest chest, replied lazily.

“Dooon’t worry. This isn’t some big ship like a cruiser or a missile submarine.”

“Right?”

“Right?”

The other two were not so much agreeing as they were driving away the question because they did not feel like dealing with it. However, the normal young man was too worried to accept anything but a proper explanation.

“B-but we’re in the middle of the battlefield here, the Legitimacy Kingdom Object will be here any moment, um, and all of you are officers with medals hanging from your chest, so it would be very bad if you were captured. In the worst case, you might meet the same fate as someone in a light SM video!!”

“Yes, but there is nothing to worry about. Look, our Laser Cracker 001 was sent out to this region of sea. That’s turned this into an ocean of death, so there’s plenty of wreckage from cargo ships and

cruise ships. And of course, there are plenty of lifeboats that dried up after no one detected their SOS signal."

"You're just scaring me more!!"

"I'm saying no one will notice us because we're disguising ourselves as one of those. Do you want us to completely vanish from the Legitimacy Kingdom's radar? Cutting-edge stealth fighters might be able to reduce their cross-section to a minimum, but not even they can completely vanish. The clever approach is to create a situation where the enemy will remove you from consideration even if you appear on their radar screen. Don't you think?"

But the normal young man did not grasp that at all. He could not even imagine a chess game three moves ahead, so it may have been asking too much of him to stand in the same world as the Martini Series that would look a hundred years into the future. Blaming only him would be cruel.

After all, the girls were intentionally avoiding a smooth conversation.

Alisa responded to his question by showing off more knowledge than necessary, Rica toyed with some playing cards while feigning apathy, and Orsia feigned disinterest in the opposite sex while clinging to the young man's arm.

The triplets all held the same thing in their hearts.

It was said these unmanageable geniuses would stage a jailbreak even if they were thrown into a top-security prison, but for some reason they acted like proper members of society when around this young man. That fact explained what was going on here.

"Hey, Dry. It looks like the Laser Cracker 001 has reached its position."

"I'm monitoring the Legitimacy Kingdom's movements, Medium. You need to get ready too, Sweet."

"Understood, Dry. Now, let's get to work."

The young man nervously looked around.

His presence was the sweet chain tying the three Martinis to the Information Alliance.

He was the sword that divided genius from eccentric.

He was oblivious to this great feat, but that was exactly what made him so adorable to them. The Martini Series narrowed their eyes in his direction and then spoke in unison.

“Let’s begin the mission. Let’s charm them with our angelic performance.”

Part 2

“Wow.”

“This is awful.”

Quenser and Heivia wrapped their arms around themselves and shivered in the cold on the flight deck of a small gray aircraft carrier. Their breath was white and the sky was the color of lead. Dull vibrations occasionally ran through the deck because the blade hastily attached to the bow was breaking through some pure white drift ice.

Just to be clear, it was currently mid-July.

They watched two connected icebergs that looked like giant breasts float past the fleet.

“What happened to our summer? For what possible reason were we sent to the tip of the Southern Hemispheeeeerrrrrre!? The seasons are reversed here, so it’s freezing midwinter! There are penguins jumping into the water over there! What happened to my paradise of the Princess and our busty commander in swimsuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuits!?”

“The pamphlet said the average temperature at this time of year is eleven degrees.”

“Like hell it is! Our breath is white! How could it be that far off average!? There’s a giant tits iceberg right over there!!”

“Heivia, it’s your fault for saying you wanted to get out of the heat after that desert. Our higher ups always take things too far.”

“There could have at least been some swimsuits in there somewhere.”

“Sigh. Speaking of swimsuits, Lieutenant Meena was shot. That’s actually a real shock. Both that she was the one behind all that and that I’ll never get to see that great rack that was about as

underappreciated as baby's-breath."

"Eh? Why do swimsuits make you think of her?"

"What a shock…"

"Hold on! We're supposed to keep each other informed in this unit, so tell your pal Heivia what happened!!"

Heivia shook Quenser by the shoulders, but Quenser's soul had half-escaped his mouth and he would not give a proper answer.

Then something else stopped Heivia.

The handheld device in his pocket rang.

"What? Are you using video chat to pretend you're having phone sex?"

"This is a little classier than that."

After checking the screen, Heivia walked away from Quenser.

Once he reached the landing on the narrow stairway from the flight deck to the maintenance area directly below, Heivia leaned against the metal railing, touched the screen with his fingertip, and answered the call.

It was not a soldier contacting him.

It was a blonde noble girl in a white dress.

"Took you long enough to answer."

"I'm not trading stock, so don't get so upset."

"Even if it's over the internet, we still arranged for this date in advance. You're a disgrace to the title of nobility if you keep a lady waiting, Winchell boy."

"If you don't do something about your attitude, you're going to be in the news for being divorced on your honeymoon, Vanderbilt girl."

Even if it was a private conversation (in fact, *because* it was), this conversation over the military line was being monitored. However, the member of the electronic simulation division monitoring the line may have been wide-eyed in shock.

The Winchell family and the Vanderbilt family were two of the biggest noble families in the Legitimacy Kingdom as well as enemies going back centuries. The dark age that had triggered the collapse of the UN had occurred just under one hundred years before, so they had carried the feud of an older age across the end of civilization.

“Well, um, how should I put this?” said Heivia. “Sorry about interrupting your vacation.”

“My, my! That is like work to me, so I don’t mind. I am currently in the middle of the Atlantic – oh, excuse me –enjoying the world’s greatest fireworks festival, so are you having trouble hearing me?”

“No. And you people have to be insane to gather more than five hundred cruise ships and launch fireworks for a full week. Are fireworks even any fun during the day?”

“Oh, dear. Our rocket fireworks reach an altitude of ten thousand

meters, you know? I can't have you thinking the Technopics is the only festival in the Atlantic."

Heivia nearly said those were normally called surface-to-air missiles or surface-to-surface rockets, but he held his tongue.

"And once night falls, the fireworks and the aurora will create a wonderful collaboration," she said.

"Where are you right now? It isn't the Arctic, is it?"

"Ah ha ha. The aurora is created when solar winds reach the ionosphere. Um, I think it's a large railgun meant to clear debris, but they said something about chemically producing a massive amount of electricity just like a laser known as a COIL."

"Oh… So instead of firing a huge shell, it uses debris reduced to a sandstorm of metal fragments measured in microns to directly repel the entire 'field'?"

"Solar winds are streams of plasma and easily influenced by electric and magnetic fields, so that whatever-it's-called can alter their course to a certain extent. By guiding it to the desired coordinate in the ionosphere, they can create a manmade aurora."

"Don't solar winds and the aurora play a role in electromagnetic pulses? Won't that violate some treaties?"

"It's okay as long as we aren't using it for military purposes. It's the same as X-rays."

That was truly entertainment for the rich. Although that kind of performance to say "look what we can do" could be seen as a sort of wartime PR.

"So how did things go with the favor I asked of you?" asked Heivia.

"Do you think I can't accomplish a simple task? Besides, I only had to check through the newspapers and the TV news. That was easier than looking up a fish recipe."

"I see. I'm awful at that formal stuff, so reading through a week's

worth of newspapers sounds harder than sharpshooting from a thousand meters."

"If you wish to call yourself my husband, you need to be more cultured."

"Let's get back on topic," insisted Heivia.

The girl on the screen sighed.

"Yes, it was just as you said. There was no article on the Special 15th led by Lieutenant Meena Stinger. Of course, there are wars occurring all over the world every single day, so listing out every last death would fill up the entire paper. Plus, they provide a variety of 'anesthetic' to ensure the fear of war does not spread to the safe countries. There was a lot of talk about the surprise visit from that…Blue Rose, was it? Heh heh heh. They may not have had any space left after talking about your little sister so much."

"Nothing about a drug war either?"

"Hm? Is that something from a movie?"

Heivia silently grimaced when he saw his fiancee's confused look on the screen.

(No sign of Colorful Vanilla, then. So any news that would disgrace the military as a whole might as well have never happened, is that it? I thought they would at least stick in a cover story that pinned the war crimes on Meena Stinger alone, but they aren't even showing the lizard's tail.)

When (supposedly) Quenser had shot the Special 15th as they tried to burn away the ergot containers with white phosphorous, he had used a Capitalist Corporations carbine.

Even when Meena Stinger had been shot in the maintenance base zone, the crushed bullet they had later found was the kind that same faction commonly used for heavy machineguns and anti-materiel rifles.

That meant no further investigation would be done.

There was nothing they could do.

Lieutenant Meena Stinger and her Black Uniform Special Platoon 15 had bene killed by enemy soldiers during battle. There was nothing more to say and they were being treated as normal war dead.

That was all.

“If you’re curious, I could look further into it,” suggested the girl on the screen.

“No, knowing what the safe country newspapers and news shows are saying is enough. Besides, what does a civilian know about the military and war?”

“Oh? Nothing is more frightening than the wealthy when they have nothing better to do, you know?”

She bowed with a smile and her image vanished from the screen.

Heivia toyed with the device in his hand for a while and slowly exhaled.

After that, he gave another annoyed comment.

“It’s too clean. Whose plot am I getting involved in here?”

Part 3

The Cape of Good Hope was the southern tip of Africa.

It was hard to tell on the standard Mercator projection maps, but that area was a quick southward trip over the ocean away from the South Pole. Penguins walked through the streets, so it was not the sweaty land of the blazing sun that people normally pictured when they thought of Africa. Latitude-wise, it was about the same as the Oceanian continent, but it looked more like the kind of rough waves, leaden skies, and rocky land that suited a traditional Island Nation enka song. In terms of the North Wind and the Sun, the north wind was going all out, so no one would ever think of trading their uniform for a swimsuit.

Or so one would have thought.

“Ahhh. It’s so hot in here. I know you’re trying to be hospitable, but don’t you have the heat cranked up too high?”

“Blue Rose, the Island Nation has a saying: oden for the air conditioner and ice cream for the kotatsu. This is truly the best.”

Just one of the small aircraft carrier’s rooms had all its windows fogged up.

In that sweltering heat, Frolaytia Capistrano was providing a mistaken sort of welcome and Azureyfear Winchell was accepting that mistaken sort of welcome. They had traded their uniform or dress for swimsuits and were unnecessarily sweaty.

The plastic pool that Black Uniform Meena Stinger had secretly used in the Rio Grande District was filled with water and the two of them sat in chairs with their seductive feet soaking in the pool. They were clenching and unclenching their toes and topping it all off by sucking on vanilla popsicles.

Quenser had been called here for some reason and he had been struck by a thick wall of feminine aroma the instant he opened the

door.

He had reflexively raised his voice.

“You people are awful!! You damn bourgeois are killing the earth in about every way possible!!”

“So you’re finally here, commoner. Come closer. Yes, close enough to touch me.”

“Woof woof!”

“Heh heh heh. How wonderfully obedient. Do you like ladies’ swimsuits that much?”

Blue must have been her favorite color because Azureyfear smiled at Quenser in a blue bikini that glittered like a tropical butterfly.

Frolaytia pulled her popsicle from her mouth and pointed it at the student.

“I may not be one to talk, but she is a powerful noble. And the type who can actually use the Winchell family’s authority. Don’t screw this up.”

“Um, can I ask why you’re calling for me so often today?”

“I’ve taken a liking to you,” said the young lady in a blue swimsuit. “Yes, this visit is something of a performance, but if I’m going to be shown around by someone, I’d like it to be someone I have some slight connection to. I heard what you did. You fought well against those Black Uniforms involved in the drug war in the Rio Grande District.”

“Eh? But that was-…”

Confused, Quenser spoke on reflex, but then a sweet flavor filled his mouth.

Azureyfear had stuck the tip of her popsicle in his mouth.

While he was unable to speak, vanilla-flavored lips moved from

extreme close range.

They mouthed the word “no”.

“…”

“Commoner, if you are to be my guide, I would like to know what kind of person you are. As a test, find an online video that can amuse me.”

“Um, eh? Okay, but…”

“Look at this cleavage. I’ll even squeeze my breasts together and give you an upturned look. Do you also want me to put the popsicle in my mouth and faffefaafafhfhefh?”

“Woof woof woof woof!!”

There seemed to be a difference in understanding concerning the previous incident, but the idiot decided to set those issues aside and take advantage of this opportunity.

He began his first mission with his handheld device in hand.

“Wh-what about a kitten chasing a laser pointer on the wall?”

“Old hat.”

“This is the silver snowscape from the peak of Mont Blanc.”

“What’s the point if you don’t conquer the mountain yourself? I climb Mont Blanc twice a year. You need physical strength and knowledge of nature to hunt well, after all.”

“Kh!! …Since it’s come to this, I’ll break out this video showing a breakdown of a chronometer. Look at all these gears! It’s controlled by springs and gears instead of electronics, so just think of the accuracy needed in the mechanic’s fingertips to…pant, pant…make this a reality…uuhhhh!!”

“Calm down, tech nerd. Are you one of those people that would prefer I step on them?”

Quenser thought the exasperated look in Azureyfear’s eyes would crush his soul. Out of ideas, his fingertip accidentally touched the banner for trending news near the search box.

The small screen filled with a greasy middle-aged man’s face. A stand was covered in microphones and cameras flashed like machinegun fire. A female newscaster spoke over the footage of some sort of press conference.

“As a royal and a member of the royal council, First Prince Flag Eggnog’s words gather international attention. This was a portion of the standard press conference after the council session ended the other day.”

“As I have been saying, drug wars only exist in spy movies. Besides, this nonsense is likely only being spread by the weak-willed youth. The addicts who cannot stop abusing Colorful Vanilla must be clinging to conspiracy theories that blame their problems on the military and government.”

“Many groups and individuals have fiercely opposed this statement,

including the Legitimacy Kingdom Academics of General Medicine and the White Knights of Women's Rights. They claim the prince's statement is inconsistent with the medical facts of Colorful Vanilla's spread and addiction and they ask whether he is forgetting about the victims who have been forced to use these illegal drugs due to their surroundings. These groups are filling the road in front of the safe country royal palace with various protest signs in hand."

"If you can say those insane things with a straight face, we can't let you lead our country!!"

"The royal family needs to kick that bastard out right away!!"

"I'm bored, so I want to cause a scene!!"

"Hooray!!"

Quenser found the festival of anger to be a horrifying scene.

"French fries! Does anyone need some French fries!? Damn I'm going to make a killing out here!!"

"Wait, you idiot! Put the mustard mayonnaise on your own fries! Ahhh! They're absolutely covered!!"

He doubted any of the news videos could move the heart of a bored noble girl, but…

"Heh heh heh. Ah ha ha!!"

"You're completely carefree!? I know they say teenage girls find anything funny, but really!?"

"No, no, no. Quenser, you have quite the sense of humor. To nobles like us, the misfortune of others is like the most exquisite honey. Isn't that right, Major Capistrano?"

"Ahem… I would prefer not to answer that."

Frolaytia cleared her throat to hold in the laughter, so this was apparently not just Azureyfear's personal tastes. It did not really make sense to Commoner Quenser.

“Sigh. It must be tough being a royal. He was definitely careless, but any man his age probably says stuff like that with a mug of beer in hand.”

“This is *noblesse oblige*. Authority brings responsibility. The greater authority of a noble or royal brings just as great responsibility with it. If a royal acts like a gossiping commoner at a press conference, it’s obvious what will happen.”

At any rate, he had cleared his first mission of amusing her. In her blue bikini that glittered like a tropical butterfly, Azureyfear slowly lifted her small butt from her chair.

“Major Capistrano, may I borrow him for a moment?”

“Yes. But…ehhh!? You’re going out dressed like that!?”

“I have completely boiled, so I could stand to feel the chilly wind for a bit. Quenser, bring that bath towel with you.”

With that said, she really did move to the heater-filled room’s door in her swimsuit. Quenser looked back and forth between Azureyfear and Frolaytia, but his commander only shrugged in her swimsuit. She was apparently ordering him to obey the selfish noble girl.

When they left the room, Quenser was a little chilly even in his uniform.

Much like after leaving a sauna, Azureyfear looked comfortable even in her blue bikini. She raised her hands, bent backwards, and let the chilly air wash over all of her skin.

Quenser asked the main question on his mind.

“Um, about before…”

“Oh, you mean in the sunflower field?”

She did not seem to care much.

She even shrugged while mentioning the sniping attack on the Blue Uniforms at the desert oasis.

“That is simple. The Winchell family is not permitted to hunt humans.”

“No one is!!”

The idiot leaned forward without thinking and the noble girl’s cleavage filled his vision.

She was incredibly cute, but he was not sure what to do when she had the same blood as Heivia. Or rather, that guy’s unwelcome face flashed through his mind and he could not concentrate.

“So it would be convenient if you took the credit for those kills as you were the one to pick up a Capitalist Corporations gun. What must be done and one’s reputation are very different things, especially in noble society. Well, try not to think about it too much, commoner. I suggest you take the credit for saving your unit. More importantly…”

Azureyfear rotated her raised arms behind her back, bent her hips forward, and peered up at him from below.

“I would like to hear about my brother. You are closer to him than anyone, aren’t you?”

“…So that’s it.”

“You look like you want to know why I would not meet him directly when we are brother and sister. I can almost sense the warm image commoners have of family. …But that concept is meaningless among nobles who are constantly in conflict with their own flesh and blood.”

“But if you want to know about it, you must not be completely divided.”

“I can’t tell you how he feels about it, though. Besides, he is something of a heretic when it comes to the Winchell family. When someone is hated by their surroundings, they will in turn hate their surroundings. It’s a sort of defensive measure.”

“Well…I’ll admit he isn’t your stereotypical noble.”

Quenser did not quite understand and Azureyfear laughed. She seemed to like that he could not imagine what it was like to be in conflict with his own flesh and blood.

It was the proof that he had a truly happy relationship with his family.

“Quenser, my bath towel.”

“So it was only a short luxury, huh?”

He held it out and she draped it over her shoulders like a cape to keep some of her warmth.

“Then again, Heivia’s Heivia. It would be heard to find something that’s different from normal. In fact, I can’t imagine his condition would change much even if he ate a rotten egg he found on the side of the road.”

“Oh, my. He must really be spreading his wings here.”

Quenser wondered if the boy had been different in his safe country mansion, but he had difficulty picturing Heivia Winchell during peacetime.

“Is he receiving letters or telegrams with any frequency?”

“I’m not some kind of Echelon Quenser who monitors all of his communications, but he gets calls and emails. It’s monitored by the military server, but everyone here at least plays an online golf game.”

Then Quenser remembered something.

“But I do see him messing with his handheld device a lot lately.”

“My.”

“I asked if he was pretending to have phone sex, but he denied it. I wonder if he was telling the truth.”

“My, my!!”

Azureyfear elegantly brought a hand to her mouth and her eyes sparkled for some reason.

She may have just had too much time on her hands.

“Then he must have a hotline to the Vanderbilt family after all… No, there is no reason to let this get to me… I already knew he had a relationship with our sworn enemy… That is just the kind of person he is…”

“?”

Quenser tilted his head as the noble girl faced the wall and muttered something under her breath.

Then an irregular tremor ran down her spine. She rubbed together her pale thighs, fully wrapped the bath towel around her body, and glanced awkwardly toward Quenser.

“I have cooled down a fair bit. Thank you for the amusing chat, commoner. I need to visit the powder room, so return to your normal post.”

“So nobles really call it the powder room…”

“Do not even think about asking too much about this.”

Part 4

“Our mission today is to eliminate a negative campaign being run by the Information Alliance.”

In the briefing room, Frolaytia began her briefing (having changed into her usual uniform).

A map of Africa was displayed on the white wall behind her and a red dot had been added to the cape at the southern tip.

“As you know, the Cape of Good Hope is a crucial marine transportation point. With instability in the Mediterranean and Suez due to a conflict between the Legitimacy Kingdom and the Faith Organization, tankers are using the safer but longer route around Africa and through the Cape of Good Hope. That means having an Object sitting there is a major problem.”

“And some idiot’s done that?” asked Heivia.

Frolaytia hit a button on the remote, the projector emitted a mechanical whir, and the map zoomed in on the Cape of Good Hope.

“It’s an Information Alliance Second Generation named Spectre Q&A. It’s an amphibious air cushion model with a laser beam main cannon that uses a dye laser. But the specs can come later.”

She used the remote again and a completely different map appeared.

It was of the Arctic at the very top of the Northern Hemisphere.

“Since the Arctic ice has begun to melt due to global warming, a new sea route is appearing: the Arctic route. The Information Alliance is actively pushing for the opening of that route, so they must want to force everyone to rely on it by blocking the Suez and Cape of Good Hope routes.”

“So they want to harass everyone at the Cape of Good Hope and

stop all the tankers and cruise ships to gather attention?" Quenser sounded disgusted. "Are they grade schoolers?"

"But this is no laughing matter."

Frolaytia hit another button and a few photographs appeared.

They were of the ocean around the Cape of Good Hope.

"The south" brought warm images to Quenser's mind, but this was the extreme south of the continent. It was also midwinter due to the reversed seasons of this hemisphere, so there was drift ice everywhere. In fact, some areas were completely covered with thick white ice.

However…

"No matter how bizarre the weather here, the formation of the ice is apparently meteorologically impossible. The odds are good the Information Alliance is using some kind of meteorological weapon. So without a truly large icebreaker, no one can cross this thick layer of ice. To be blunt, even this aircraft carrier fleet we borrowed won't cut it. Our makeshift icebreaking blade can only do so much, so we can only get so close. I'd rather not meet the same fate as the Titanic out here."

"Hey, wait. Then…"

"That's right, Quenser. This battle is mostly a naval one, but there are also several layers of thick ice all around here. The Princess uses static electricity which requires attaching or removing a float when switching between land and sea. But I don't want the Spectre Q&A noticing that and targeting the ground below her. I don't even want to think about that two hundred thousand ton mass sinking to the bottom of the ocean."

"Then the Princess will be doing this with the naval float attached?"

"Precisely. But that makes things difficult for us. Footwork is everything in battles between Objects. Particularly in the Spectre Q&A's case since it's laser beam main cannon will require quick movement. And yet the Princess will be restricted by the need to

break the ice. That will increase the resistance and slow her down. If she gets careless, she could play right into their hands."

The Spectre Q&A was an amphibious air cushion model. They had not been shown the specs yet, but it may have been able to freely move between the ocean and the ice. If it did not need to break the ice, it would have nimbler footwork.

"As a side note, as the name Spectre Q&A suggests, it is a Second Generation that specializes in optical sample analysis. Quenser, as a battlefield student, I assume you're familiar with femtosecond optics, the world of one quadrillionth of a second."

"Well, yes. But…you can't possibly mean…!!"

"That's just one of its Swiss army knife of options. An atom's oscillation lasts from a few dozen to a few hundred femtoseconds, but a pulse laser of only a few femtoseconds is even shorter. That special light can isolate and record the movements of atoms like movie film and then analyze the footage frame by frame. Simply put, the chemical changes are stripped bare in their microscopic states. Even if you mix yourself an original drink at the soda fountain, it can probably break down each of the components and list them in order. And even more accurately than the person who mixed it."

Quenser gulped, but Heivia had not understood any of that. The difference was so stark it was almost sad, but Frolaytia continued regardless.

"This Swiss army knife was probably originally designed to extract and analyze the makeup of fragments of the enemy Object's armor, the static electricity repellant floating in the air, or the special gas for low-stability plasma cannons. That way they can find an effective means of attack."

"Originally?"

"We're getting back to that drug war. The various 'products' may seem the same, but there are differences depending on where they were made. You could call it the drug's 'fingerprint'. A detailed

examination of the impurities introduced in the refinement process would show slightly differing signatures even in the same sort of drug. For example, the impurities will differ depending on whether a certain ingredient was obtained by soaking commercial cold medicine in alcohol or if it was grown as a plant. By combining all those differences, a unique signature for a manufacturer will appear. Colorful Vanilla has a cloyingly sweet smell from the vanillin-like impurity it gains during creation, so it's worth looking into a little more."

Frolaytia spun the remote in her hand.

"We found the ergots used to make Colorful Vanilla in that crashed plane in the Rio Grande District. Out of the seventy-five drugs circulating through the Capitalist Corporations, the intelligence division has acquired samples of the Colorful Vanilla that has increased so dramatically recently. If we could use the Spectre Q&A's optical sample analysis, we could determine just how it's made. By the way, the Spectre Q&A's Pilot Elite has a PhD in pharmaceutics and physiology and is suspected to have created a few different designer drugs in the past. A designer drug is one with the original chemical structure changed slightly to slip past drug tests like a variation of a computer virus. But it doesn't seem they're targeting safe countries in a drug war. Their MO seems to be using the internet to send the recipe to the worn-down soldiers in the enemy maintenance base zone and triggering a moral hazard there. But either way, nothing good can come from the spread of funny-smelling cigarettes or sodas that make you feel a little too happy."

In other words, the ergots made in the Legitimacy Kingdom were being made into drugs in the Information Alliance and the completed Colorful Vanilla was being sent to their common enemy, the Capitalist Corporations. It was a little confusing and it made one wonder how much any single part of the process knew about the whole.

"It looks like the drug war run by Black Uniform Special Platoon 15 was just one gear in the giant contraption that is the Legitimacy Kingdom. In other words, there is still a mastermind behind all this. It hurts that Meena Stinger was killed before she could say who, but we've found another line back to them here. If we can get to the

Spectre Q&A's Pilot Elite or get the necessary data out of the Object itself which doubles as an optical sample analysis lab, we might be able to uncover the mastermind hiding in the Legitimacy Kingdom. We can't ignore someone who seems to think they're a chess master as they infect both battlefield countries and safe countries. We will find the clue we need here and settle this. That is all."

Part 5

Any maintenance base tended to be full of motion just before a mission.

The naval base made of a fleet built around several small aircraft carriers was no exception. Quenser, Heivia, and many other soldiers were rushing through the ship's narrow corridors. They were all preparing cold weather gear and small boats. Basically, they were scrambling for the most well-maintained gear. Getting the short end of the stick would mean being thrown out in the midwinter ocean with only a coat that had a big hole on the butt.

"This is just plain awful! Isn't this a one-on-one between giant Objects? Why is that busty commander sending worthless soldiers to the front line? What possible reason is there? She isn't just using up a quota like road construction at the end of the fiscal year, is she!?"

"I want to be on the battlefield even if I don't have to. There's no point in being a battlefield student otherwise."

"It's because of idiots like you that war will never end!"

"What movie do you have a hard-on for now? Some Capitalist Corporations anti-war film?"

Of course, the two idiots were not the only ones running around.

Men and women, old and young, were desperately grabbing for the newest gear. If he was going to be crushed in the middle of a crowd, Quenser decided he would make the most of it and charged right into an area with a high concentration of female soldiers, but then he noticed a different voice in the mix.

"Marie, I swear I'll come back to you. Wells, take care of your mother while I'm gone."

"Hey, Kevin, let's not get all melancholy while staring at a picture

before heading out to the battlefield!”

“Oh, Quenser. Hello. But don’t worry. I’m not about to lose here. Once this battle is over, I promised to put in for some leave and take my family to an amusement park. Eh heh heh.”

“Kevin, you idiot! What kind of setup is this!?”

As he began that fruitless argument, another voice cut in.

“Commoner.”

It was the previous Blue Rose, but she was not in her previous blue swimsuit. She instead wore her previous blue dress with. She had her arms crossed as she leaned against the wall to stay out of the way of the soldiers rushing around.

But unfortunately, she did not have a large enough chest to lift up the way Frolaytia did.

When Quenser came to a stop, he was immediately driven out of the race for the best gear. Even gloomy Kevin left, but that was hardly surprising when staying still was a lot like fighting an even greater current than a salmon swimming upstream.

But even before Quenser, Heivia looked over to her and their gazes met.

“Tch.”

“Hmph.”

The siblings barely spoke.

Heivia clicked his tongue irritably and left the unwelcome family member to continue preparing for battle. The look on his face made it clear her very presence was a problem, not just anything she would say or do.

Azureyfear Winchell left the wall and approached the student who had been left behind. When her sudden approach brought her face right in front of his nose, Quenser lost his nerve.

She whispered to him so no one else could hear.

“Take care of my brother, will you? I can only watch from here, after all.”

“So you are worried for him,” he muttered in annoyance.

What was even the point of her surprise visit? If it was for foreign negotiations or a performance for the press, she would not have stayed for the move from Central America to southern Africa. It was possible she was using the status of her family to disguise the fact that she was simply checking in on her family member.

“Listen, noble girl. He wouldn’t die even if a shell blew up right next to him. After all, he doesn’t have an ounce of pride, so he’ll immediately curl up and reduce the odds of being hit. Did you know the rate of death from a shell explosion drops from eighty to fifty percent depending on whether they’re standing up or down on the ground? In other words, there’s statistical backing for his endurance, so don’t worry.”

He sighed and gave that arbitrary comment, but then he felt a soft sensation and a faint rosy scent on his right cheek.

After pulling her head back, Azureyfear placed her index finger on her lips and peered up at him from below.

“If you bring my brother back safely, I’ll do the same thing on the other side.”

“…Ohh.”

“If you have time to stand around, then get moving. You take care of things where I can’t go, Quenser.”

With that said, the girl in a blue dress spun around and left.

For once, Quenser was left behind with a hand on his cheek.

“Oh, you’re finally here, tech nerd. It was like a fight for soba bread

at the school cafeteria, but I snagged us a high-tech boat. Hurry up and help me fold this-…bgyah!?”

As soon as the noble boy faced his awful friend, a fist slammed into his nose.

“What!? Wait. What the hell was that for!?”

“I guess it doesn’t matter, but take care of your sister, you spoiled bastard.”

Part 6

“Mh…”

The Princess puffed out her cheeks while sitting on the very top of the Baby Magnum’s spherical body.

The 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion’s prized weapon was currently held between two small aircraft carriers by hundreds of wires as it underwent maintenance, but this meant the Princess had to wait and thus had nothing to do.

Rather than doing any direct work, the old maintenance lady was using a tablet to manage the maintenance as a whole and give instructions, so she spoke to the Princess while operating the touchscreen.

In the modern age of clean wears which were entirely focused on Objects, the mental state and conditioning of a single individual could lead to serious problems for everyone.

“Does it bother you?”

“I feel like Quenser has been neglecting his studies lately. He isn’t coming to see the Baby Magnum.”

The old lady gave an exasperated sigh.

This was a matter of impressions, not statistical data. A greedy commoner hoping to strike it rich would never overlook a treasure trove like this.

However, there was a reason for the Princess’s inaccurate “impression”. Arguing back with accurate data was not going to convince her and the old lady was used to dealing with her, so she continued the conversation in search of another angle to use.

“It’s an issue of frequency. He sees the Baby Magnum all the time, but he only gets to see the enemy Object once. A new Object might seem more important to him because it holds fresh new surprises.”

“Boo. So I’m the boring girl he can see any time he wants?”

“Honestly, who do you see as your enemy here? The Spectre Q&A or the Blue Rose of Winchell?”

Only then did the Princess realize her mistake, so she began waving her hands around.

“No. I was being serious here.”

“Who ever said love isn’t serious? And since bloodline comes first in the Legitimacy Kingdom, you could call it the foundation of society.”

“Uuhhhhh… Uuhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

The Princess completely overheated. She seemed to be at a complete loss as to what to say. They could not have her getting a fever like a child too excited about an upcoming field trip, so the old lady intentionally changed the subject.

“It may not be our place to talk since it’s Objects that put food on our table, but weapons development is a sinful business. Meteorological weapons in particular make me think that.”

“You mean the ice?”

The Princess stared into the distance where the horizon was dyed white. The scale made it hard to tell, but the thick ice had to have covered kilometers of the ocean. The fleet built around small aircraft carriers could not cross it, so normal tankers and cruise ships could easily sink after colliding with it.

That unnatural ice blocked off the sea.

As the old maintenance lady operated her tablet, it looked less like she was maintaining weapons and more like she was using big data to optimize inventory work at a large drug store.

There was a reason for that.

“That’s why you’ve been checking over the secondary cannons so carefully, isn’t it? This is a fight between Objects, so anti-personnel and anti-vehicle weapons would be meaningless.”

“You were planning to do that from the beginning, weren’t you?”

“Yes,” the Princess readily admitted. “Why would I just break through the ice like normal? I don’t need to fight on their turf if I don’t want to.”

Part 7

The Cape of Good Hope was stormy.

The tall waves of the ocean were gray, as if they had absorbed the color of the cloudy sky. The worker ants of the Legitimacy Kingdom advanced using the electric motors of their rubber boats and they quickly ran across some white “mines”. In other words, drift ice. At first, they were the size of a stone one could carry with both arms, but they soon grew to the size of bathtubs and finally a noble’s mansion.

“Damn, it’s that tits iceberg from before. Kevin, watch where we’re headed! I’m not about to crash into that thing and sink.”

“Wow, they’re covered in penguins. Do you think they and the ice came all the way from Antarctica?”

“They might just be taking a vacation in this area.”

There were about ten people per boat. The middle-aged man named Kevin was pointing his handheld device’s lens around taking photos.

“What are you doing, Kevin? If you’re analyzing the ice, could you share that data?”

“Sorry, Quenser, but I’m taking pictures of the drift ice. My son Wells absolutely loves penguins, so he’s sure to love this.”

“Hey, you aren’t summoning the grim reaper and getting us caught in the crossfire, are you?”

The ratio of ocean to ice gradually reversed and they found themselves sailing through rivers or valleys in the gaps between the ice. Eventually, there was no excess space and they had trouble getting the boats any further.

A white wall over a meter tall waited ahead of them. If it stuck up that far from the water, they could not even imagine how far it

spread beneath.

“This ice really is weird,” said Quenser as he stroked its surface through his thick glove. “It’s like one meter dice were packed together like chocolate crunch. That gives it a lot of handholds though, so we shouldn’t have any trouble climbing up it.”

However, the student did not hear any of the usual complaints from his awful friend, so he sighed.

“Are you still in a bad mood, you gloomy noble?”

“A pat on the nose from some skinny SOB isn’t about to deter the Great Heivia. But I still can’t believe you would take Azureyfear’s side and treat me like a villain when you have no idea what’s going on there. Being a beautiful girl must be nice. A single teary look and you can overturn any law!”

“…”

Quenser looked like someone who had just noticed a pile of old newspapers after the recycling truck drove by, middle-aged Kevin looked nervous, and Heivia raised his voice because he could not stand the annoying “pressure” bearing down on him.

“Fine, fine! I’ll admit it. I may not know where exactly Azureyfear falls in my list of sisters, but I do know her!! She was pretty cute when she was a kid, but that completely changed after I started dating Lady Vanderbilt. It turned out she didn’t have a personality of her own and she was only following the program placed in her head by the Winchell family. She was completely done in by her noble blood.”

“So you started having trouble with your cute little sister because of your girlfriend? Do you want me to punch you again, you spoiled bastard?”

Seeing a boy pout his lips and sulk was only creepy. Quenser dealt with him and turned back to the rough ice wall again. The rocking rubber boat made for unsteady footing, but since it was higher than the ocean’s surface, the meter tall ice was between waist and chest

height when he stood up.

Everyone on the boat crawled up onto the ice land where they found a different world covered in a flat plain of pure white. The ice literally continued to the horizon. It may have been bigger than a small megafloat airport.

“This iceberg is practically an ice shelf. It’s like a continent.”

“Quenser, I know your eyes only know how to stare at girl’s asses, so quit pretending to appreciate the scenery and help me with this work.”

“You get so hesitant, complain-y, and just an all-around pain-in-the-ass when it comes to your family. Are you in a rebellious phase or are you a kid with his parents at school for parent’s day? The problem is that you actually think it makes you look cool.”

They used the synthetic fiber rope prepared in the boat to pull the boat up from the ocean. Then the ten-person boat visibly changed form. The air inflating the balloon was released, the umbrella-like framework bent like an arm, and the alloy armor opened up. In less than twenty seconds, it had become a rectangular suitcase-sized mass. It had treads and looked like a miniature snowmobile or tank.

Kevin used his handheld device, but not to take photos of the penguins this time. He seemed to be controlling the miniature.

“It’s called an Armadillo. It normally follows along automatically to analyze images and monitor the situation, but it still needs some human help. Although that makes it kind of cute.”

Quenser scratched his head while listening to the middle-aged man.

“Will this thing really help?”

“We have a lot to carry this time, so a robot should come in handy.”

“True…”

There was not much infantry could do in a battle between Objects.

The mission these idiots had “gladly” received from Frolaytia was to take samples of and analyze the makeup of the unnatural ice as well as scattering decoy armor and shell fragments to interfere with the Spectre Q&A’s analysis work.

That meant carrying back containers of the ice they had carved off as well as carrying around some amount of trap fragments to spread across the wide range of the battlefield.

“Yeah, this is a pretty unwieldy job.”

“Ah ha ha. Well, it’s still better than going out for a firefight with other human beings.”

They did not know when, where, or how the Spectre Q&A would take its samples, so they could only place the fragments at evenly spaced intervals as if aligning them on graph paper. They had to carry around the equipment and measure everything out, so the robot was a lot of help.

“Come to think of it, they sent bull robots after us in the Rio Grande District. Everyone’s developing this kind of thing, aren’t they?”

“I would think this style makes more sense than adding legs. I’d heard whispers that the infantry is starting to need power station vehicles for all their electronic equipment. Having your soldiers worried about their phone battery would be pretty sad, after all.”

In his own stupid way, Heivia must have realized that his bad mood was not very productive because he casually replied.

“Basically it’s a durable caddy. It’s got power, water, food, and even that boat we were using. There’s more of a demand for these indirect weapons that don’t help fight but carry the equipment needed to maintain the front line. It can be used to block bullets in a pinch, but the electronic simulation division’s calculations didn’t recommend it. They said the gunfire could trigger a spark explosion in the transformer and we’d be caught in the blast.”

“Eh heh heh. Isn’t it cute? It reminds me of a cleaning robot. When we would run ours back home, Wells would chase after it.”

“Hey, you might be missing your family, but don’t draw a face on it with permanent ink. It’s military property.”

That said, they would not need to use it to block bullets.

Their enemy was not infantry with assault rifles or handguns.

“…”

The pure white land underwent a great change. An unbelievably large crack ran through the icy surface that continued to the horizon. Seen from a satellite, it may have looked like a pane of glass after it was stabbed with the tip of an umbrella, but it looked like a giant valley to those on the scene. The rocking of the waves caused an even greater height difference between the two sides of the fault.

“Here she is,” spat out Heivia. “That was our Princess.”

The icy land seemed to be made from one meter dice packed together like extra-large chocolate crunch and a giant form crashed into it with its naval float still attached. It was the Baby Magnum with its seven main cannons and reverse Y-shaped support.

And if the Princess was here, then the other Object would be somewhere nearby too.

The Information Alliance Second Generation was known as the Spectre Q&A.

It was an amphibious air cushion Object, so it smoothly slipped up onto the flat-looking ice in the distance. It looked like a fusion between a spider and a crab. It was supported by four long, narrow legs and it had four pincer-like arms on the front. The surface of the pincers was likely covered with vacuum cleaner-like suction devices. Those would collect the armor panel fragments or low-stability plasma cannon gas floating in the air, find their weak points with its optical sample analysis, and construct its tactics based on that.

This battle was one-on-one, so it was obvious what would happen next.

“Quenser, Heivia, and everyone else. Be on your guard.”

The Princess warned them over the radio.

Immediately afterwards, a frighteningly indiscriminate bombardment began.

They did not begin with their main cannons.

Instead, it was the many secondary cannons covering the spherical bodies like a sea urchin or chestnut burr that moved first. The Princess did not bother breaking the ice with her icebreaking blade. She started by firing metal railgun and coilgun shells to break the white scenery into countless blocks and then fired laser beams and low-stability plasma cannons to instantly vaporize the blocks. She advanced while turning the field ahead of her into the ocean and water she needed for her naval floats.

Quenser and the others had no choice but to watch.

But they did not have a chance to just calmly watch as the Baby Magnum and the Spectre Q&A exchanged fire with their low-stability plasma cannon and laser beam main cannons.

There was a white explosion near the surface.

The dangerous drift ice could have opened a hole in the side of a cruise ship, but the intense heat had forced it to flash vaporize, triggering an explosion of water vapor. But by the time they realized that, a white wall several kilometers long was approaching the soldiers with intense pressure.

“Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

They got down on the ground. Quenser and Heivia both got down, realized they had nothing to grab onto, and got chummy with the suitcase-sized Armadillo power vehicle made from folding up the rubber boat. The white wall struck a moment later. The beads of ice stung their cheeks. Their vision was as poor as in a sandstorm and Quenser saw a large silhouette flying by at greater than his height. Rather than a UFO, it was a poor Legitimacy Kingdom soldier who had not been blessed with anything to grab onto.

“Keviiiin!!”

“I told you! This is what happens when you carry a picture of your family around on the battlefield, you idiot!!”

“We can’t investigate the ice or scatter fragments like this. What do we do!?”

“Shut up! Just focus on surviving, skinny boy! At this rate, they’ll grab our corpses and use their optical sample analysis to reveal the locations of every last mole and erogenous zone on our bodies!!”

Next, they heard yet another explosion like a balloon popping.

The Princess was not using these water vapor explosions to damage the enemy Object. They were simply meant to destroy the endless obstacles getting in her way, so these white walls would reach the soldiers again and again.

“You’re kidding! You have got to be kidding! Let’s head back to the crack in the ice shelf. If we stay up here, we’ll be just like a line of ants being sprayed with a hose!!”

“When the land is shaking this much!? The chunks of ice are rocking in the waves, so if we climb between them, we’ll be crushed by a giant mouth!!”

An icy South African wind blew through.

It quickly washed away the water vapor and the scenery opened up once more.

Quenser felt like he was seeing something he should not be.

A giant mushroom cloud covered a radius of one hundred meters. It looked like a scene from some old footage.

That too may have been a massive water vapor explosion and Heivia’s eyes widened as he shouted out.

“I don’t think the weather can get any more bizarre than this!!”

They did not have time to stick around.

They were assaulted by intense pressure, like an invisible giant's hand was sweeping them away. This time, they were pulled up into the air. There were not given a choice in the matter and tossed right into the nearby canyon-like crack.

They plunged into the gray sea.

The Armadillo had fallen with them, so it opened on its own and instantly filled with air to form a rubber boat.

The seemingly depthless water squeezed at their hearts, so they frantically swam for the surface and grabbed at the boat. But then they noticed someone else with them.

It was Kevin.

He seemed to have fallen into the crack ahead of them.

"Cough, cough! A-are you two okay? L-let me grab on too."

"Kevin, grab on here. That was the Princess. Our life insurance only pays out if the enemy shoots us, so you'll lose big if you let that kill you."

"Don't worry, don't worry. I'm not going to die. My son Wells gave me a good luck charm to ward off bullets. Dying here would mean rejecting his efforts and I'm not about to have him feeling down."

"Ahhhh!! Someone please stop this guy from calling in any more bad luck!!"

Even soldiers decked out with cutting-edge equipment were superstitious. The two idiots covered the man's mouth so he could not do anymore to summon an unknown grim reaper.

Also…

"I don't care anymore! Why are we even out here again!?"

"There is a lot we need to do. Let's review, Heivia. We're supposed

to get the Spectre Q&A to gather decoy materials so it performs an erroneous optical sample analysis and we're supposed to gather samples from this unnatural ice. If we know the system behind its solidification, we might be able to use a chemical to instantly melt it."

"Leave all that to the Princess! With all that firepower, what does a little ice matter? If she wanted, couldn't she fire some plasma into the South Pole to wipe out all of mankind?"

"No, not necessarily."

Quenser climbed onto the Armadillo boat, stood up, and observed the battlefield like a pervert peeping over the fence of the girl's bath.

Kevin asked a hesitant question.

"Wh-what is it, Quenser?"

"She's melting the ice before she moves. That means her route is visible in advance, so the Spectre Q&A can predict the Princess's next move. Nimble footwork is everything in an Object battle. It can predict where she'll be one second later and fire its laser main cannon there."

"Then what do we do?"

"What we were sent out here to do: search for a way of melting these mountains of ice without relying on the Princess. If we can get rid of all this unnatural ice, we can overturn the Information Alliance's advan-…"

Quenser trailed off and looked down at his soaking wet uniform. Then he looked to his surroundings: Heivia and Kevin who were still submerged in the water and clinging to the Armadillo boat, the gray sea, and the ice wall made from unnatural dice packed together.

"This is strange."

"Eh?"

“Dammit, did my assumptions about the winter sea and this waterproof and cold-resistant equipment get the better of me? They did, didn’t they!? This isn’t right at all!!”

Heivia looked at his awful friend in confusion because Quenser removed his glove and stuck his hand in the seawater.

“And even if she’d been in a sauna, it was strange that Azureyfear could walk around the ship in only a swimsuit.”

“That pervert! Is my sister the type that says she can only sleep in the nude!?”

“It’s also strange that you two can soak in that seawater while only looking chilly and that my uniform didn’t freeze after I climbed up into this biting wind! And to top it all off, there’s this!!”

Quenser slapped the water’s surface from the boat.

“This water isn’t cold.”

“Eh? Eh?” asked Kevin. “What do you mean, Quenser?”

“It’s just your average seawater. This isn’t anywhere near the midwinter environment you need for it to freeze! That’s right. If this was cold enough to create an Antarctic-style ice shelf, we probably would have died a few minutes after falling into the seawater. The average temperature for the southernmost part of Africa is eleven degrees. It just isn’t the right environment for ice to form naturally!!”

Heivia and Kevin skeptically removed a glove and checked for themselves.

The idiot was right.

They did not feel the piercing cold of icy water. They felt the lukewarm temperature of water left sitting in a cup.

“Wait. Wait, wait. So what? This ice drifted here from Antarctica, right? Then it isn’t that strange that these giant icebergs are floating in normal seawater, is it?”

“One meter dice of ice were packed together into this giant ice shelf. It’s clearly manmade. And there’s no sign of the corners melting and rounding off. It wouldn’t look like this if it had been left in normal seawater for long periods of time.”

“Then what is it?”

“You’ll understand if you carve off a piece with a knife and taste it. While the surface has been exposed to the sea wind, the inside won’t taste salty. The trick to creating ice that won’t melt is to reduce the impurities. If this is a meteorological weapon, they’ll have used a filter or a centrifuge to remove the salt, dead plankton, and the like.”

“Wait a second. Then…you’re kidding, right!?”

“It’s making the ice here. Right here and now. No one else is supporting it.”

Quenser really did carve off a piece of ice with a knife, stuck it in a thermos, and continued chatting.

“And it’s made enough to create this white land that reaches the horizon. This is history’s greatest obstacle. Not even a tanker full of the polymer used for diapers could build a wall like this. If you’ve got to obey conservation of mass, it’s best to use the seawater that you’ve got a near unlimited supply of.”

“Wait, wait, wait. Then let me ask you something. How much coolant would they need to create a new continent for the planet? Are they using Freon, liquid nitrogen, or liquid helium? Whatever it is, they’re violating entropy or whatever! It would never work out. Even refrigerators and freezers need more than a ton of electricity. You need some kind of coolant and you can only cool as much as the coolant’s specs allow for!”

“…”

The student thought for a bit on his awful friend’s objection.

“No, it may not be cooling the water at all.”

“So…what? Are they using some kind of magical device from the future?”

“There isn’t a rule that says water only freezes after being cooled down to 0 degrees. Melting points and boiling points vary depending on the environment.”

“Yeah, the fact that cup ramen tastes worse when made in the Andes shows up on quiz shows a lot. Marie loves those shows, but Wells always pouts his lips when she doesn’t let him change the channel.”

“You can tell us more about your wife and kid later. Those cup noodles are what matter now. That’s because the boiling point for the water changes due to the difference in atmospheric pressure. Ice is the same. Apply pressure and the temperature at which it freezes will change.”

“What? So are we supposed to look at this in reverse? Like dig down 4000 meters below the ground?”

“No, normal water turns to ice at around 7000 atmospheres of pressure. There’s a professor at my safe country school that was always doing experiments related to that. Something about creating a holy bullet by making water molecules act like metal molecules.”

“Seven thousand!? How are they supposed to do that, you idiot!? That’s just unrealistic. This isn’t a micro-level lab. It’s the macro-level battlefield!”

“Oh, really? Objects are two hundred thousand tons. That’s twice the weight of old aircraft carriers. It could easily supply that pressure by creating a press that focuses its weight on a single point like stepping down with some high heels. Take those four legs for example.”

Kevin groaned, either at the crazy ideas Quenser could come up with or at the extraordinary specs of the enemy Object. Water froze at zero degrees. He never would have reached this point without first questioning that standard assumption.

Meanwhile, the student continued like normal.

“There’s also a paper on applying one million volts of electricity to a meter cube of pure water to solidify it into ice. The Object’s reactor can supply that, so that might act as a secondary method.”

The student placed the thermos in the rubber boat’s holder. When the boat folded up to the size of a suitcase, it would be safely stored inside the Armadillo.

“Anyway, it doesn’t need a ton of coolant that way, so it can ignore that limit. Whether it uses pressure or electricity, it can indefinitely produce ice without turning the entire Object into a giant freezer.”

“…”

Heivia and Kevin fell silent for a while.

Those conditions brought a troublesome problem to the surface.

“You understand, don’t you? The Spectre Q&A isn’t working with some other unit. It can create all this ice and block off the sea all on its own. No matter how much ice the Princess melts, it can fill the gaps back up. She’ll be a bird in a cage the entire time.”

“This is no joke. So we’ll be getting slapped around by our own Object the whole time!? Even those water vapor explosions will kill us eventually!!”

“About those water vapor explosions,” cut in Quenser. “Its main cannon is a laser beam using a dye laser, right? The unnatural ice and the screen of water vapor… They both interfere with light. If it was designed with both of those in mind, it might have some trickier tactics prepared.”

Part 8

The Princess maintained her focus even as a white screen of water vapor covered everything and new ice flowed in below the Baby Magnum.

She had done nothing more than secure her means of passage.

The true earth-shaking battle between Objects was yet to come.

“!”

The locations of both Objects, the changes in the opponent’s movements, the orientation of their cannons, the movements and creaking of their lenses and sensor heads, etc. All of the data taken in by the Object was ultimately analyzed by a human mind and she operated the Baby Magnum with the instincts of her fingertips. The Spectre Q&A fired its frightening laser beam main cannon a moment later.

She just barely managed to avoid it.

And instead of a straight line attack that flew at the speed of light, this attack had curved slightly through the curtain of water vapor.

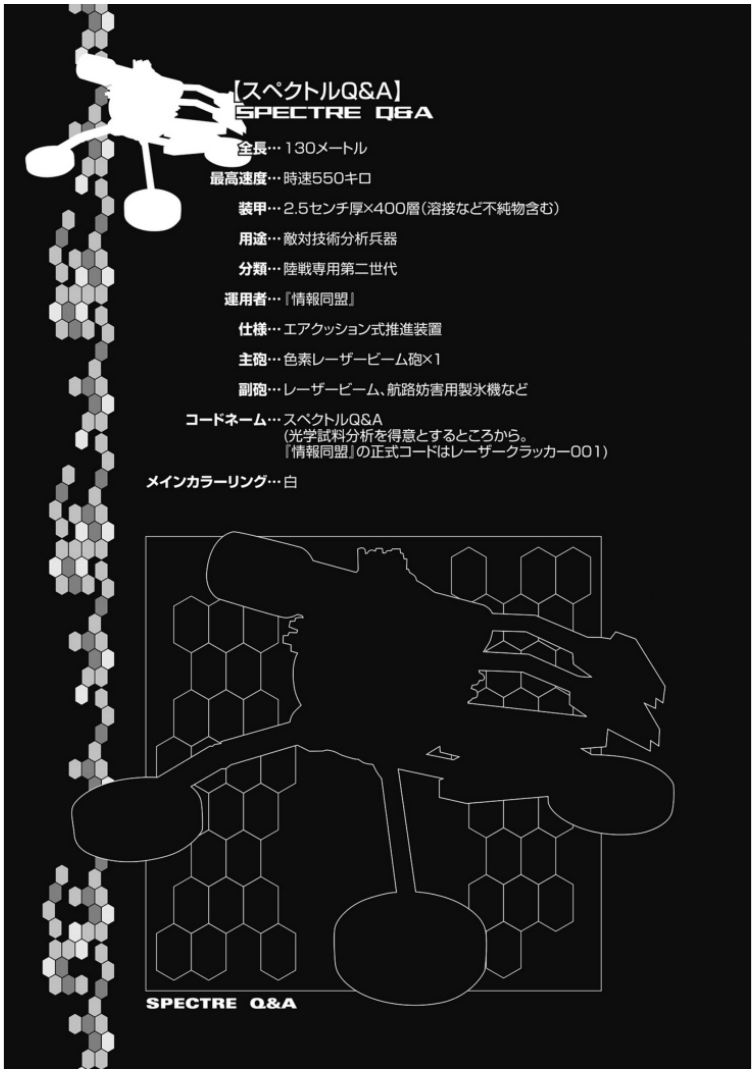
“I already experienced a bending main cannon back in the Rio Grande District!!”

This time, a laser beam flew off in a seemingly random direction, collided with a hunk of ice, and bent at a sharp angle with some reduction in power. However, the Princess had predicted this as well, so she had moved her machine out of the way.

It was the same as a mirror, lens, or prism.

The Spectre Q&A was using some kind of technology to remake the icy land, reflecting its light with that ice, and bending it with the water vapor screen. But if one viewed the enemy Object as the source of the light and knew how the various obstacles would interfere with that light, it was not impossible to deal with.

Of course, this was the same as constantly doing the mental arithmetic to determine how a laser pointer would bounce around an amusement park's house of mirrors, and while the source of the light was constantly moving around at over five hundred kph.



But…

(I can do it.)

The Princess operated the control stick while placing some belligerence on top of her logical thinking.

Weak lasers in her special goggles read the movements of her eyes and sent her wishes to the machine.

(This isn't an unbeatable foe. Second Generations have a single point of specialization, so if I can bring an end to that gimmick, they aren't a threat. With my focus on the fundamentals, I have less excess weight and have lighter footwork!!)

None of that was wrong, but that did not mean it was entirely correct either.

Yes, where did the Spectre Q&A's name come from?

It retrieved samples and optically analyzed them to work out its enemy's weakness.

So the longer the battle continued, the more clues it had to make a comeback.

Part 9

“The discord between the Winchell family and the Vanderbilt family is concentrated inside this bottle,” said Azureyfear Winchell inside the borrowed aircraft carrier’s command room.

Frolaytia mentally held her head as she sat in front of a laptop at a work desk. She was trying to directly command the Object that was currently in battle, but modern warfare’s advanced digitization allowed her to do so almost anywhere as long as she had communications equipment. But unforeseen trouble was always a possibility, so she did not want to receive a message like, “The LTE antenna just died and there’s nothing we can do. Tehepero.” The entire battalion could be wiped out like an online game character after the player’s signal cut out.

That was when the noble girl started speaking.

The girl’s bewitching body looked a little pale and she held a small bottle of blood-red wine.

“Young lady.”

“I’m not going to drink any. I only spray some on my clothes and hair like perfume.”

She giggled and then her voice dropped in tone.

“That way I will never forget the centuries of hatred contained in this bottle. That is the Winchell family way.”

“I see. Well, Blazer Bouquet is a very…unique brand that people often claim tastes like drinking perfume.”

“My, my. So you enjoy it too, major?”

Frolaytia was always smoking her long, narrow kiseru, but for some reason, she coughed now. She may have been reminded of her safe country maids and tutors.

“Blazer Bouquet is made by mixing together several rose petals and allowing them to ferment and brew within quite a lot of flower nectar. As you mentioned, major, wheat or grapes are much better if flavor is what you seek, but a powerful impression is needed for a drink served at a celebration.”

Azureyfear held the perfume-like bottle’s lid between her fingertips and swished the contents around.

“It all began several centuries ago. It was far before even the fall of the UN that is seen as the turning point between eras. This is a fairy tale about a princess who was pursued by an entire nation. Our Winchell family remained loyal and hid the princess even if it meant breaking the law, while the Vanderbilt family upheld the law and pursued the princess even if it meant betraying their loyalty. The princess tried to cast aside her name and position to live happily among the commoners, but they would not allow it. On the day of a secretly-held wedding, it was a bottle of this rose wine turned into a Molotov cocktail that broke through the chapel’s stained glass window.”

Frolaytia narrowed her eyes a little.

This was a delicate historical issue directly linked to ideology. If she said the wrong thing she would trigger the kind of harsh response that was willing to continue hunting someone down for one hundred years. She chose her words carefully as she responded.

“I had heard that story is merely a highly plausible theory, just like the big bang theory.”

“Yes. When the rise of Objects brought the demise of the nuclear age, all sorts of storage media were turned to ash. There’s no telling just what people threw into that figurative conflagration if they had any inconvenient truths they wished to rid themselves of. It must have looked like the most effective shredder imaginable. For one thing, no one even knows if the fall of the UN really was what created the Objects. Similarly, no one knows the truth of our two families after crossing that turning point.”

The Blue Rose continued after kissing the small blood-red bottle.

“But if facts were intentionally erased, there was a reason for them to be erased. Even if the story contained within the Blazer Bouquet is false, something even more repulsive lurks even deeper within. Could you feed your baby some baby food that listed its ingredients simply as ‘unknown’? Can you really rest easy just because you don’t know? Really??”

“…”

“The very fact that it is listed as ‘unknown’ is suspicious. Thus there is no real reason to search any further. Even if the maker sent out a correction, you would never believe it. You would throw out all of the baby food and rely on a different maker, wouldn’t you?”

She was already set in her ways on this.

It was not just the lack of a stairway to compromise. She had prepared arguments to justify not seeking compromise.

That was Frolaytia’s honest opinion, but she of course did not speak that aloud.

Then an electronic tone sounded.

Her laptop was lending a helping hand at the best possible time.

“Major Capistrano, this is not quite an emergency, but the large-scale water vapor explosions among the icebergs have altered the weather over a wide area.”

“Excuse me, young lady. …Is a tornado or downburst forming?”

“Nothing yet, but our Doppler radar is showing a definite supercell. Noise from the gathering storm clouds and surges of lightning might interfere with our transmissions. In order to stay informed of the changing environment, I would recommend coming down to the battle command station if possible.”

She did everything she could to keep it from showing on her face, but Frolaytia was relieved and concluded she was blessed with some excellent subordinates. She had no problem with historical romance, but that changed when it had brought about hatred that

still continued to this very day.

She folded up her laptop and stood from the large chair at the work desk.

“Allow me to see you to your room.”

“No need. I would collapse from heat stroke in there. Might I stay here?”

That would normally not be allowed, but they were essentially “renting out” the entire small aircraft carrier. The command room had nearly been turned into a hotel room, so it only contained a change of clothes and the laptop Frolaytia held under her arm. There were no documents or equipment with classified information and the drawers were all empty.

So she could easily answer.

“Yes, that’s fine. I will be posting a guard in front of the door, though.”

“Please do.”

After their formal exchange, only Azureyfear remained in the room.

She removed the small bottle’s lid, attached a spray cap, and lightly sprayed some on the thick blood vessels on her wrists and neck.

She calmed herself as she enjoyed the rosy smell and then reached for the chest of her blue dress. She pulled out a small handheld device she had not informed the battalion she had.

She used a communications method based on a special detour to contact a certain someone.

“How do you do, White Lily of Vanderbilt? You seem to be investigating us, but did your lovely rat-like efforts turn anything up?”

“I can’t believe you… This isn’t passing through the military server. What kind of dirty magic trick is this?”

“Secrets are the ultimate luxury only afforded to the privileged. The common folk put all their effort into experiencing cheap imitations, but those of us at the top are of course laughing at their wasted efforts.”

“And?”

“Just talking to myself, White Lily. I care not what the Whore of Vanderbilt does in her spare time. I will praise you for shaking that vulgar ass of yours to steal away a portion of our Winchell family as part of your plan, though”

The Blue Rose placed the word “but” on her tongue.

With one hand holding the handheld device, she used the other to spin around the perfume bottle of hateful wine.

“If you drag my brother into that pathetic hobby you call ‘pacifism’, you will wish I had only burned your face off with a Molotov cocktail, Bitch of Vanderbilt. I will turn every last hair on your head into dust.”

She did not speak particularly strongly, but a strange pressure was hidden within her tone.

A commoner with no history behind their name may have fainted when that pressure struck them head-on.

But the girl she was speaking to was different.

The Legitimacy Kingdom’s Vanderbilt family had been around for at least several centuries, just like the Winchell family.

The young lady of that family laughed as she replied.

“Oh, dear. …Oh, dear. Oh, dear. Oh, dear. Don’t tell me you think I forced Master Heivia to join me in all this.”

“…”

“If so, I’m sorry to say I was only doing what he asked me to. I will, however, admit I had some spare time on my hands and continued

my investigation after interpreting his request more broadly than he probably intended."

"You whore."

"Blue Rose. It isn't right to blame your brother's lover just because he isn't giving you any attention. …What are you doing? The Vanderbilt family has a countermeasure office dedicated to the Winchell family and you are hiding something that not even their network could detect."

"You will know soon enough."

Water splattered against the window

Dark clouds had rapidly filled the sky and rain was pouring down.

"Or should I say, it is already too late."

Part 10

It was raining.

Raindrops large enough to hurt on the cheek poured down like a waterfall.

The artificial rain shower created a great din. The previous water vapor explosions had caused this. The vaporized water had cooled in the air, solidified, and fallen as water once more.

“Is it just me or is the Princess the one kicking us around this time?”

“It’s probably just you.”

“No, it’s because you were flirting with Azureyfear! Nothing good comes from pissing off the goddess of victory that holds all of our lives in her hands!!”

“You’re blaming this on your sister again, you gloomy noble!? I’m sick of hearing that. That has nothing to do with the Princess’s mental state!!”

“Are you on Colorful Vanilla!? How else could you be so clueless!? You’re the real spoiled bastard here, so I think you’re the one that deserves a fist to the face!!”

“S-stop that, you two. C’mon, you shouldn’t fight.”

The two idiots ignored the weak-willed middle-aged man and started grappling on top of the artificial ice shelf, but they soon realized they had bigger problems.

A flash of light much brighter than before stabbed into their retinas.

“Gh…ah!?”

“What the hell!?”

They curled up like lightning had struck nearby, but the light had not been targeting them. If so, they would have been vaporized already.

It was a laser beam.

It had grazed one of the Baby Magnum's seven main cannons as the Object continually dodged the Spectre Q&A's man cannons.

"Dammit! It didn't react that much before, did it!?"

"Wait a second. I think the Princess was shaken by that!"

The optical weapon had done more than tear at the thick armor. A tremendous explosion and shockwave followed. The half-melted main cannon had already been rendered useless, but it bent and strained like a fishing rod. The entire two hundred thousand ton mass seemed to be shoved to the side and it stopped moving.

The Spectre Q&A's main cannon moved carefully.

It fired the main cannon again and again. The Princess quickly resumed her evasive action, but it lacked life.

Heivia muttered to himself in the downpour.

"What was that? It didn't look like a normal laser."

"A dye laser. Damn, Frolaytia even mentioned it back in the pre-mission briefing!!"

"Wh-what is that, Quenser?" asked Kevin. "How is it different from a normal laser!?"

"A dye laser has color added to the medium used to oscillate the laser. By switching between media, this almighty laser can theoretically create light with any wavelength, from ultraviolet to visible light to infrared." Quenser demonstrated the fruits of his studies to his awful friend. "But dye lasers are pretty inefficient. Enough that a different type of laser is needed for the pumping… that is, adjusting it to a usable band of light. You could say that thing's main canon is a combination of different types of lasers, like

a multi-stage rocket. Since it uses different wavelengths of light, it has to switch between different media like a color palette. And of course, the more complicated the system, the harder it is to maintain and the greater the risk of it malfunctioning. Normally, a dye laser isn't well-suited for use as a weapon."

"What are you trying to say, Quenser!?" asked Kevin.

"It's a really useful but really inconvenient laser! The end!!"

"Yeah, well that giant thing's gotten it to work. There has to be a reason why. Unless some shitty government official had some shitty plot to embezzle the people's shitty tax money."

"Heivia, how do lasers do damage in the first place?" asked Quenser. "Setting aside some special cases, they transmit the energy of the light to their target and destroy it with that. That's the basic idea of a laser. That means efficiency matters. What wavelength of light will build up the most energy in the material making up the armor? What matters here is that the Spectre Q&A's dye laser main cannon can produce light ranging from the ultraviolet to visible light and infrared."

"Hold on. So that blast just now…"

"We already know it performs optical analysis on the stripped pieces of armor panels and the special gas floating in the air and puts together its tactics based on that. There are countless variations in Object armor. The expert craftsmen add in the fire-resistant reactive material almost by instinct and no machine can emulate it. But what if the Spectre Q&A's analysis has reached that level?"

"It can choose the laser that will have the most effect on the Princess's armor? That's what caused that explosion!? She took far, far more energy than from a normal laser!?"

"Yes, but it's more about efficiency than power."

"It doesn't matter. That isn't just a tricky-to-use optical weapon. Is it more like an explosive laser that destroys the material with all its

built-up energy!?”

Kevin trembled in fear at what Heivia was saying.

Even now, the Princess was making quick evasive actions. Her footwork was as nimble as a mixed martial artist’s, but the Spectre Q&A was sending in more drift ice. That artificial ice was created by freezing the sea water with great pressure. Once that stopped her, her enemy could get a definite hit in. The preparations for that were already underway.

“B-but it’s still a laser isn’t it? She already knew it was bad to get hit by it! So she just has to make sure she isn’t hit! Then it won’t explode, right!?”

“Weren’t you listening, Heivia?”

Quenser rejected that optimistic view.

“Its dye laser can create any wavelength.”

A moment later, several explosions erupted from the space around the Baby Magnum rather than the Object itself.

The noise alone was enough to not just pound on their eardrums but fill their heads with internal pressure. Heivia curled up and yelled while suffering from a dull headache.

“What is it now!?”

“It created the optimal wavelength for either the surrounding air, the low-stability plasma cannon gas floating around, or the static electricity repellant!! It’s just like a laser space elevator. The air expanded to create explosive shockwaves that hold the Princess in place!!”

The laser contained enough energy to pierce through an Object which could survive a nuclear blast.

That pressure exploded in the air and scattered around.

The Baby Magnum was not at the center of the blast and was not

destroyed, but entirely avoiding the surface of pressure created by the shockwave was not easy and that pressure approached from multiple directions at once. The fifty meter machine's movements were cut short and it could not keep up its nimble evasions.

The Spectre Q&A had no reason to rush.

It had the optimal game piece on the optimal square on the game board, so it could tease its opponent until they self-destructed.

With the drift ice interfering from below and the shockwaves from above, the Baby Magnum was losing valuable seconds and would eventually be fatally delayed.

Then the monster's dye laser would switch its palette and fire the most efficient attack for the Baby Magnum.

Whether opening a photo album or activating a voice recorder, Kevin curled up and muttered something while staring at his handheld device.

"Marie, Wells. Dad is doing his best on the other side of the globe. I swear I'll keep my promise, so let's have a blast at the amusement park. But…ahh, but if dad can't make it back…Wells, listen up. You need to support your mom. This is a promise between men, okay?"

"Oh, shut up you. Stop praying like that. More importantly, what are we going to do?"

Still curled up, Heivia clenched his teeth against the shockwave that was breaking apart the icy land.

"We were caught in this thing's web from the beginning! How are we supposed to win!?"

Part 11

A round lifeboat floated between the drift ice.

Inside were three blonde girls in red parade uniforms and the young man in charge of their care.

“Good, good. I was a little worried when the Legitimacy Kingdom melted the ice and triggered all those water vapor explosions, but we should be fine now.”

“It’s all progressing well.”

“It feels like we’re finally back on track, doesn’t it?”

All three were facing each other with military handheld devices in hand as if they were children playing coop with handheld games. The young man was left out and he kept glancing out the round window at the intermittent light and noise.

The three sisters (who actually wanted to show off to him) were a little displeased with that, but they refocused themselves.

“I didn’t think you would accept this job, Dry.”

“Eh? Why not?”

“Because this request for help came from the Laser Cracker 001. Y’know, the one suspected to be involved in that drug war. That may be efficient, but isn’t it disgusting?”

The sensible young man’s shoulders gave a start as he stared out the window.

The triplets (mistakenly) concluded they could gather his attention with this topic, so there was no stopping them.

“He’s not some money-obsessed drug dealer. In a way, he is taking part in the drug war, though.”

“Huh? Then wat is he doing?”

“The Laser Cracker 001’s Elite uses the internet to send his designer drug recipes to the enemy maintenance base, but he doesn’t do it to sow confusion in their maintenance or command structure.”

“Ohh, I get it now.”

“He wanted a bad example. Something like a poster hung up in an infirmary.”

“Right, right. Just like any other type of war, there’s offense and defense in a drug war. You attack by sending your products to the enemy nation and earning money. You defend by blocking the products from entering your own country and secretly spreading awareness to make the youth afraid of using the products. A bad example is the best for that. Like showing pictures of paint thinner addicts’ teeth or the torn-up skin of addicts after they tried to scratch at the hallucinations of bugs crawling all over them.”

“You can’t use your own people for that bad example.”

“And even if it’s an enemy nation, you don’t want to destroy the people in a safe country.”

“So he used an enemy nation’s soldiers. If the news runs a story on the sorry state of the soldiers after abusing drugs on the battlefield, no one will try to use that ‘cool and artistic key to the gates of heaven’.”

“Even drugs are about brand name and image, aren’t they? You can see that pretty clearly when a legal drug becomes an illegal drug, when the illegal drug starts being called an herb or something, and when it’s finally known as a dangerous drug. That’s a different sort of defense.”

“It leads to rumors that the filthy soldiers on the battlefield were caught in a national conspiracy, have their teeth falling apart as if from cavities, have their noses constantly running, and get hallucinations that lead to chewing their own fingers to shreds. Of course no one’s going to try to use it after hearing that.”

The young man was reaching information overload and had completely lost track of who was saying what. Oblivious to that minor change yet hoping to attract that normal person's attention, the three genius girls continued their complicated discussion.

"But what does that say about the current incident?"

"Yes, that ergot alkaloid lysergic acid derivative."

"Colorful Vanilla."

"He's the one in charge of producing that, right? That seems out of character for the Laser Cracker 001. He usually takes the defensive side of the drug war to reduce the damage done."

"There's a reason behind it."

Alisa Martini Sweet smiled thinly with the kind of cruelty unique to a genius.

"This is but the tip of the iceberg."

Part 12

“Heivia, Heivia.”

“What is it, goddammit!? My ears are hurting too bad to hear you properly!!”

As the repeated explosions and shockwaves gradually cornered the Princess, Quenser grabbed Heivia’s shoulders and shouted loud enough to not be drowned out.

“We need to pull up the rubber boat that’s still in the water! We need the Armadillo’s help. Heivia, you and Kevin help me out!!”

“What are you even trying to do!? Wouldn’t jumping down to the boat be the faster way out of here!?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

Quenser glared at the distant Spectre Q&A that was firing its explosive laser main cannon that made use of a dye laser.

“We’re going to do something about that thing. I can’t let it keep bullying the Princess. And if it gets away, the drug war affecting safe countries will continue. Colorful Vanilla will be spread without end while some government official’s wallet gets fatter. That would leave a bad taste in my mouth, so we need to do something, whether that means capturing the Pilot Elite or analyzing the drug.”

“You’re…right. It seems to only be targeting the Capitalist Corporations for now, but they’re still targeting safe countries. I don’t want to leave any chance of that being spread anywhere near Marie and Wells.”

They used the synthetic rope to pull up the boat. Once it was up on the ice, they let out the air and it automatically transformed into the suitcase-sized Armadillo.

“Let’s turn this around before they reach checkmate. Come on, Heivia.”

“Are you kidding!? We have to run through all those explosions and shockwaves!?”

The two idiots and the middle-aged man crouched down and ran along the cracked ice land with the small power supply Armadillo.

As they felt vibrations that seemed to beat all of their skin like a drum, Quenser spoke over the radio.

“Princess, can you hear me?”

“What is it, Quenser? I’m a little busy.”

“Turning down people’s invitations on the pretext of being ‘busy’ is a warning signal when it comes to interpersonal relations, so be careful.” He twisted his lips in a smile as he joked. “Can you move from the point you’ve been concentrating your fire on and move the primary battlefield elsewhere? I want to set up a trick while you do, so you’ll have to make sure the Spectre Q&A doesn’t notice.”

“You don’t like giving easy requests, do you?”

“If you can’t, the situation will only get worse. You know you’re being pushed around on the chess board, right? You’ll only be cornered if you let more time pass.”

She replied through her actions rather than words.

The Baby Magnum veered to the side. Laser beams and low-stability plasma cannons blew away the surviving portion of the artificial ice shelf, clearing a new path with water vapor explosions. She was running off.

“Let’s go, Heivia! You too, Kevin!!”

“I know, you bastard, but can you at least tell me how many times you’re planning to get us killed today!?”

In the area where the Objects had been fighting, the thick ice had either melted or was full of cracks in a web-like pattern. It was not a ship designed to float, so it could capsize at any time. It was quite thrilling, but the two idiots and the middle-aged man got as close to

the “cliff” as they could.

But then short bursts of gunfire reached them.

“Wah!!”

Kevin curled up on the spot and Heivia dragged him back behind the suitcase-sized Armadillo.

“What!? Why are soldiers showing up now!? Are those Information Alliance!? I thought the Spectre Q&A worked on its own!”

Heivia used his large knife as a mirror to check on the situation from behind cover. He saw four or five frogmen in pure white wetsuits, so they may have been planning to fight on the ice. They were about two hundred meters away. There were more cracks on the seemingly pure white surface, so they had likely crawled up from the ocean rather than appearing from thin air.

“Seriously, what is this!? I have no idea what role they could be playing.”

“It doesn’t matter. If we don’t take them out and keep moving, we can’t help the Princess! She’ll be bullied to death by the Spectre Q&A!!”

Part 13

Inside the round lifeboat, the three girls in red parade uniforms clicked their tongues in unison.

One of them opened her mouth.

“Our white frog bodyguards reacted. They may have gotten unexpectedly close.”

Part 14

Dry gunfire echoed across the icy land.

However, the enemy had the upper hand. The three guys were crammed in behind the suitcase-sized cover and unable to move, plus Heivia was the only one who could return fire. There were not that many Information Alliance frogmen, but they still worked together to corner their enemies.

Heivia realized the situation was not going to improve, so he made a suggestion.

“Hey, let’s let Kevin escape. If we drop him and the Armadillo into the water, he can escape with the boat.”

“If we don’t keep moving, the Princess will lose! Then the entire battalion will be wiped out!!”

“That’s why we’ll stay here! Quenser, pull out those bombs you love so much. I’ll throw a smoke grenade to block their vision, so let’s stack up the blocks of ice to create a new shield. You can blow up a nearby mountain to get the ice. I don’t see how we can fight back otherwise.”

“It’s risky, but it’s looking like our only option.”

Quenser gulped and agreed, but middle-aged Kevin looked nervous.

“W-wait. You’re going to build yourself a pyramid in the middle of all those bullets? Even with the smoke blocking their vision, they’re still going to be firing. You’ll be killed if you’re hit!!”

“You don’t need to worry. On my signal, fall back with the Armadillo. You meet up with the rest of the battalion!!”

“But why just me!?”

“Shut up! I don’t want to protect a greasy old man, but you’ve got a wife and kid, right? You promised to take them to an amusement

park when you take leave next, right!? If I let you die here, they'd hate me forever. I'm not about to let that happen!!"

"Say hi to Marie and Wells for us. Have enough fun for us all."

It was not that Quenser and Heivia were used to this.

The two idiots' faces were covered in unpleasant sweat.

But they stuck with it.

They stared at the Information Alliance frogmen who had come from who-knows-where, but Kevin's face crumbled as he looked at those two.

And he made a confession.

"It was…"

"Hm? What!? I can't hear you over the gunfire, Kevin! And just get going already!!"

"It was all a lie!!"

Kevin shouted over the deadly din this time.

"I made up the marriage!! I was ashamed of not being married at my age, so whenever anyone asked about it, I said I was. And as I kept lying, it got more and more detailed. Next thing I knew, it was like this. I don't have anything. You'd be wasting your deaths if you covered for me! So let's think of something else!! Something that doesn't require risking your lives for someone who'll spend his leave going to strip clubs alone and eating cup noodles in his tiny apartment!!"

"…"

"…"

It was a lovely confession.

All expression vanished from the two idiot's faces.

They removed their assault rifle, backpack of Hand Axe plastic explosive, and other equipment. Then they equipped it all on Kevin instead. In no time at all, he had evolved into a snowman-like Full Weapon Kevin. It even looked like he would have trouble moving with all that on.

“Eh? Eh? Wait. What is this?”

“It’s simple. Your job is simple: Run, kill, and come back. It’s the standard job for a Legitimacy Kingdom soldier living off of the people’s taxes.”

“Wait a second! I forced myself to make that confession because I didn’t want to lose anyone! I wanted us to find a solution where everyone survives!!”

“Don’t worry. This is the best option.”

Quenser and Heivia both placed a hand on Kevin’s shoulders, brought their smiling faces in close, and spoke in unison.

“It’ll be fine. There’s no way a guy like you would die.”

Part 15

“Wah, wah! That’s gunfire! Wh-what do we do?”

The young man let out a shout as he looked out through the round lifeboat’s window. The three girls of the Martini series continued relaxing and reached for a radio.

“Yes, retreat, retreat. All you white frogs need to find a good point to escape! Don’t be stupid. They’ll send reinforcements if you kill them and they’ll continue the investigation even if you die. Having some unknown people disappear for some unknown reason is perfect!! The Object is still making a mess of things up there, so the birdbrained Legitimacy Kingdom will forget about you pretty quickly. Just! Do! It! You need to make sure they don’t find us here in the ocean!!”

Part 16

And finally…

“Wow, Kevin actually survived.”

“From now on, he can be our shield. Let’s just follow him around.”

The white frogmen (probably) from the Information Alliance were gone. Kevin’s suicide charge had not actually killed them all. They seemed to have retreated into a crack in the thick ice.

“What was that about?”

“Who knows. This might just have been their landing point.”

Meanwhile, Kevin was angry.

He was gasping for breath and throwing his hands into the air on the pure white land.

“Hurry on over here! Hurry uuuuuup!! What was that, you pieces of shit!? Why would you send me on a suicide charge!? I thought we were friends!”

“What do you think about that?”

“He decided for himself how close we were and then got mad when it didn’t turn out that way. I can see why he isn’t married.”

At any rate, the direct danger had passed.

If they did not get back on track, the Baby Magnum would be defeated by the Spectre Q&A. They needed to collect what was scattered across the paths – or rather, the area – the two Objects had passed through during their fight.

Quenser crouched down and focused on something glittering on the vast icy surface.

“Found it.”

“What is that?”

Heivia was asking about a ten centimeter wide disk that looked like a crushed dome. It had deviated so far from its original form that he had trouble picturing it.

“This is one of the Baby Magnum’s armor panels. It was completely melted and then re-hardened after pouring down on the ice. It’s shaped like a drop of dew on a window, right?”

“Then did the Spectre Q&A take this in to analyze the Princess’s structure?”

Heivia glanced over at the Armadillo.

“That busty commander gave us some decoy armor and special gas, didn’t she? We might be able to confuse it if we scatter them around.”

“It’s too late for that now. It’s already finished its official optical sample analysis, so it’ll be able to tell those are decoys now. Fortunately, we don’t have to do that.”

“?”

“They don’t have to be decoys.” Quenser waved the disk around a little. “One or two isn’t enough. Heivia, Kevin. Let’s split up and search for the Princess’s armor. The more we have, the better.”

“Dammit. I feel like a kid searching for unexploded ordnance for some money.”

“Ugh. I risked my life for trash like this?”

With that, their battlefield scavenger hunt began.

Quenser, Heivia, and Kevin gathered the scattered armor fragments and placed them on top of the Armadillo.

“The Princess is going to be stripped bare before long. Can you tell

us what we need to do now?”

“This should be enough. Princess!!”

“What?”

“I’m about to give you the Armadillo’s control frequency. Um, it’s model number…S…12…A! Use its location for this! Listen, I’m only going over the plan once!!”

Part 17

The Legitimacy Kingdom called it the Spectre Q&A.

The Information Alliance called it the Laser Cracker 001.

That Second Generation Object's Pilot Elite had already perfectly drawn out the pathway to victory. The Object had a press-style icemaker that used its massive weight to harden the seawater into artificial drift ice. It also had a laser that created giant explosions and shockwaves using the special gas floating in the air. Those factors gradually dulled the Legitimacy Kingdom First Generation's movements and reduced its freedom of movement. Once that passed a certain point, the enemy would be immobilized and he could fire the most effective explosive laser.

Piercing straight through the center would break it apart like a giant firework.

But then something odd happened.

The outdated Legitimacy Kingdom First Generation put up an unnecessary struggle.

Water vapor rose from below the Laser Cracker 001. It was a massive white curtain that made it look like a cumulonimbus cloud had formed on the ground. However, the Pilot Elite was unfazed. The Laser Cracker 001 used an amphibious air cushion, so the ice melting away was not a problem. Its many sensors could still detect the enemy's position through the white curtain. Most importantly of all, randomly destroying the game board was pointless. To anyone who knew the rules of chess, an amateur moving without giving it any thought only seemed to be placing the noose around their own neck.

That was why the Elite's path to checkmate was shortened by twenty moves.

Weak lasers read the movements of his eyes and the enemy was

accurately targeted through the curtain. He chose the recorded wavelength for the enemy's armor rather than the special gas and switched the main cannon's color palette.

One attack.

It would only take one attack.

The Pilot Elite did not hesitate.

His thumb stroked across the button at the top of the lever and he pressed it.

A moment later, the screen before his eyes filled with the color white.

Part 18

They had not had time to leisurely put some distance between them.

Quenser, Heivia, and Kevin were caught in the middle of a giant water vapor explosion and collapsed onto the pure white ice shelf.

“Dammit! Son of a bitch!! What was that!?”

“I-I won’t die here. I’ll be just fine! After all, I have gifted blood!! My brother’s an astronaut!!”

“That’s as useless as a blood type horoscope, you dumbass!!” Heivia shouted in absolute desperation. “There was a huge explosion right next to the Spectre Q&A! Did its main cannon screw up or something!?”

“No,” corrected Quenser. “It was the Princess’s armor fragments we gathered. We placed them on the ice and had the Armadillo’s radio signal act as a guide. The Princess blasted them and caused a water vapor explosion, so the melted and vaporized armor turned to spray with the water. So what do you think happens if someone fires into that curtain with an explosive laser designed to efficiently transmit its energy to the Princess’s armor and explode?”

“Oh…ohhh!!”

“That’s what happened, Princes!! The Spectre Q&A was hit by the shockwave from that point blank blast. Finish this before it can recover from the knockback!!”

The Information Alliance’s Second Generation had a powerful main cannon and the unexpected damage created a short lag before it could recover.

The Princess was not about to overlook that.

The revolver-like turret at the base of her main cannon turned to select the low-stability plasma cannon out of the multiple options.

As the Spectre Q&A wobbled and seemed to lack life, she did not hesitate to target the center of its spherical body.

A bright light and an explosive sound surged out.

The blast pierced the vital point, destroying the reactor, and the Second Generation seemed to swell out. So much energy burst into the outside world that it caused an unbelievably large explosion. It seemed to wear away the lifespan of their retinas and eardrums, but they felt a strange high in addition to the pain. The disconcerting pressure hanging over them was eliminated, their safety was assured, and they were overwhelmed by an instinctual elation, much like staring into a flickering flame.

This feat was known as dragon slaying.

The sight seemed to easily break the floodgates of human rationality.

Kevin raised a frightened yet strangely excited voice.

“W-we did it!! I didn’t die!! I’m not gonna let myself die single!! Ohhhh!! Let’s get back to the base zone where love and romance await me!! …H-huh? Why don’t you look happy?”

The two idiots ignored the middle-aged bachelor as they stared blankly into the distance.

“Hey, what do we do now?”

“About what?”

“We can’t figure out who’s behind the drug war using the ergots without either that Pilot Elite or the Object itself, right?”

Part 19

Frolaytia was holding her head back in the aircraft carrier's battle command station.

Destroying the Information Alliance Second Generation, clearing the unnatural ice blocking the Cape of Good Hope, and securing the safety of the sea were all desirable results, but now they had lost their chance to determine who was behind the drug war.

"It's better than getting wiped out because we were too focused on that, but I still want to punch them later."

Meanwhile, Frolaytia received a report from a young operator with the courage to speak to her when she was clearly in a bad mood.

"We just received an external communications request. A civilian one. It seems to be from the young Vanderbilt lady."

"Not a problem. Put her through."

She had it routed to her laptop and a familiar face appeared in the video chat window.

However, something was not right.

"Major Capistrano!? There's a Second Generation Object there!"

"I can't discuss details of military operations with you, lady. But I can tell you the Information Alliance threat is gone and your secret lover is just fine. But just this once, okay?"

"No!! Vanderbilt's countermeasures office has finally tracked them down. The threat is not an Information Alliance Objec-…"

Severe static filled the transmission, but the answer arrived before she could question it.

"…a Legitimacy Kingdom Object! Azureyfear has you in her deadly sights!!"

At that same time, Quenser, Heivia, and Kevin were picked up by the other Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers taking part in the mission. They were stuffed inside a rubber boat made from an Armadillo as they and the Baby Magnum made their way back to the aircraft carrier fleet.

“Anyway, is your brother really an astronaut?”

“He’s probably lying again.”

“I-I am not. You might not believe me, but that one’s true!”

At that exact moment, a deafening noise filled the world.

The next thing they knew, more than two thirds of the hundred-ship fleet, including destroyers and early-warning ships, was broken apart. Their relief at finally returning vanished in a heartbeat and their minds went blank. There was nothing they could do as a giant wave sped their way. Unable to maintain its balance, the rubber boat flipped right over.

“Bwah!”

“Just grab on! You’ll get caught in the sinking ships! And what was that!?”

“Ah wah wah wah wah wah.”

“Kevin! Grab onto the boat if you don’t want to die!!”

They had no time to flip the boat right-side up, so the soldiers grabbed on and witnessed what happened next.

There was a giant iceberg that looked like two mountains stuck together.

“What!? What is that!?”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me! It’s that tits iceberg!!”

It crumbled, melted, and shattered from within.

Something far too large was slowly revealed.

It had a spherical body fifty meters tall. In addition to the air cushion directly below, it had upside-down Y-shaped insectoid legs with boosters covering the sides. It had a single main cannon on the very front and it lacked the countless secondary cannons that usually made one look like a sea urchin or chestnut burr. Instead, some strange devices that resembled peacock feathers were disconcertingly moving on the back.

Quenser spoke in utter shock.

“An…Object…?”

“But who does it belong to? Was the Information Alliance hiding another-…!?”

Heivia trailed off, so Quenser looked over to his awful friend.

“Hey, what is it?”

“You’re kidding, right?”

Heivia cried out like he was having a nightmare.

“Why the hell does that Object have the Winchell family crest on it!?”

Part 20

The three Martini sisters clapped their hands with joy inside the round lifeboat.

“Yay!”

“Success, success. Losing the Laser Cracker 001 was a shame, but this was our top priority. I’m just glad the surprise wasn’t accidentally revealed while they were melting all that ice.”

“In this day and age, completely hiding from radar and satellites is impossible. Even the best stealth can only reduce the radar cross-section so much, so completely disappearing isn’t easy. …The best way to hide is to provide a reason for the large dot on the screen that everyone will accept. For example, icebergs may look small on the surface, but they continue for hundreds of meters below the water.”

Only the young man was staring out the window like he was seeing the end of the world.

“Y-y-you mean you intentionally sealed an entire Object inside the artificial ice? That way it could be carried in by the ocean current without anyone noticing!?”

“Good job! You figured it out on your own! Let me reward you.”

“Hey, stop that, Dry! But I take it that means the higher ups authorized this.”

“Because they knew they would get something even better in return,” said Alisa Martini Sweet as she laughed and joined the fight over the normal man. “They knew they would get something worth handing the Legitimacy Kingdom a Second Generation built in one of our factories. We get to watch as a true celebrity in an enemy nation disgraces herself by starting a civil war as the greatest sacrifice of the drug war. It’s the ultimate negative campaign.”

Part 21

The Cape of Good Hope region was instantly transformed into the Bermuda Triangle or Sargasso.

A great number of ships sank into the ocean or tilted and just barely remained floating. There was no recovering though, so the crew

used the time limit until the inevitable sinking to escape on the lifeboats.

Meanwhile, a girl in a blue dress ignored the lifeboats and stood tall on a broken fighter wing with her arms crossed.

As Heivia desperately clung to the upside-down boat so as not to be sucked in by the current of the sinking fleet, he stared blankly at his sister.

“I believe I forgot to ask before: how do you do, brother? What do you think of Second Generation Destruction Fes that I have received? Don’t you think it has the coolest shape, truly befitting the Winchell family crest?”

“What are you…saying?”

“Do I have to spell it out?”

Azureyfear pointed her thumb back over her shoulder to direct his attention toward the dreadful fifty meter form.

“That is my personal possession. It took some doing, though. Even for a noble, owning an Object is a bit of a hurdle for a private force that is not part of the military. I even had to cross borders to have it constructed in an Information Alliance factory.”

“That’s impossible.”

“I never said it was easy. We built the control system, but the Information Alliance found so many things to complain about and refused to hand over the Object itself. I was a little worried when they delayed it until today, but they have confirmed receipt of the money and it arrived in time for its launching ceremony.”

“Objects aren’t that simple! You need more than the five billion dollars it costs to construct! There are usage and maintenance costs! And since the Information Alliance is involved, there would need to make sure you can’t betray them with it and make sure their data isn’t leaked to the Legitimacy Kingdom!!”

“Oh, dear. But you’ve already seen the alchemy used to raise those

funds. A rotten yet sweet sort of war that brings unlimited riches to whoever runs it."

This time, Heivia Winchell felt his mind go entirely blank from that casual comment.

Instead, Quenser responded while clinging to the same boat.

"The drug war… So you were the one running it on the Legitimacy Kingdom side."

"But…she's a noble!" shouted Kevin as he grew pale. "Why!?"

Nobles were a symbol of law and order. The commoners trusted them enough to leave politics to them and they seemed so far removed from common life, but Azureyfear nodded with a wicked smile on her lips.

"How many manors outside the watchful eyes of the noble and royal councils do you think the Winchell family owns? Transforming a few of them into ergot plants was hardly difficult. Plus, the Information Alliance was willing to handle the production of Colorful Vanilla and use it to attack the Capitalist Corporations. I could have done that on my own, but they were kind enough to help."

"Then the one who finished off the Special 15th Black Uniforms in the Rio Grande District was…?"

"They were useful pawns, but I couldn't have them talking there. Although I only needed to keep it hidden until today, so I ended up using a fairly sloppy method of silencing them."

A powerful wind roared through.

They were not the only ones who could not remain silent. The Princess in the Baby Magnum had begun rushing toward the unknown Object as if to say she refused to allow any more damage to be done.

But Azureyfear calmly pulled folding neckband-style headphones from the chest of her dress, unfolded them, placed them on her

ears, and spoke three simple words.

“That is useless.”

Even at a distance, Quenser and the others could not tell what had happened.

An unknown explosive sound filled their minds.

Quenser’s thoughts were flashing in and out as he realized the Destruction Fes bearing the crest of the Winchell family had used some kind of weapon. He could not gather his thoughts. He could not tell front from back, left from right, or even up from down. If he had not wrapped a rope on the side of the upside-down boat around his wrist, he might have drowned.

His inner ear had been taken out.

But even if he had been in a normal state of mind, would he have been able to follow that with his eyes?

If the Baby Magnum’s movements were like the footwork of a mixed martial artist, the unknown Object’s were like lightning. It moved so sharply that the Princess could not keep up. She had been the one charging toward it, but it moved up to her and they glared at each other from less than ten meters away. For humans, it would have been close enough for their lips to touch. And even that close, the unknown Object moved around behind the Princess.

It was like grabbing a delicate girl from behind and gently kissing the nape of her neck.

The unknown Object tapped its main cannon against the back of the Baby Magnum’s spherical body.

It would be too late by the time she turned around.

A point-blank blast would vaporize the princess before she had a chance to eject.

“The inertial Gs a Pilot Elite is exposed to are said to occasionally exceed twelve Gs. A normal fighter has an acceptable limit of 9.5

Gs, so that range cannot be exceeded without creatively taking a step beyond standard anatomy."

Azureyfear made it sound so simple as she brushed back her golden hair and let dark joy fill her voice.

"But my Destruction Fes is entirely remote-controlled by a great number of personnel, so that human limit of inertial Gs can be entirely ignored. No one can capture the Destruction Fes now that it has been freed from the yoke of gravity. It will simply evade, simply rush in, and simply strike a fatal blow. It is the ultimate ultra-mobile combat Object. A sluggish manned model cannot even hope to touch it. This is not something that can be overcome with effort. It is built into the design."

Part 22

“But it’s actually working pretty well.”

Orsia Martini Dry gave a whistle as she spoke.

The round lifeboat rocked calmly in the waves.

No, at this point, it may not have mattered who was speaking.

The triplets functioned as a single unified problem-solving device. The process mattered less than the single answer they reached while chatting.

“Even as she used us, that girl is missing the main point. The Destruction Fes is indeed a major threat when viewed altogether, but the Object itself is little different from a First Generation built with existing technology. The only difference is all the extra boosters added on while ignoring the safety side of things. The main point is that it has no one on board and is remote-controlled, so it can break the limit on inertial Gs. In other words, recording and gathering the data alone will do little damage to the Information Alliance.”

“What matters is the Orchestra System that lets ten thousand normal people pilot the Object, right? That global remote control system is made up of fifty to one hundred stealth submarines and countless satellites. Without analyzing that, the Object itself is useless. And our full AI control still isn’t enough to deal with the constantly changing battlefield.”

“And destroying that system wouldn’t be easy. Not only would it take time to find the submarines, but the system can continue its remote control even with about half of them destroyed. Just how far will the damage spread while you’re wasting time on that?”

“Does it matter? This is a civil war based on an old Legitimacy Kingdom grudge. That has nothing to do with us in the Information Alliance.”

“And we’ve acquired an excellent bad example. The nobles are symbols of justice who are meant to protect the commoners, yet this one got into the narcotics business. What better ‘infirmary poster’ could we get?”

“But we aren’t going to end this here, are we?”

“Of course not. Of course not. We even used our Laser Cracker 001 to help out this Legitimacy Kingdom civil war, so we need take much, muuuuch more in payment.”

“What mental structure does a Legitimacy Kingdom noble have and how exactly will it be distorted?”

“Gaining data samples from the enemy isn’t easy, but it worked out well this time.”

“Perfect Browsing… We need all the sample entries we can get to build that giant system that will guide you to any answer with a simple search.”

“And…”

“We might just get a look at a mental structure much, muuuuch greater than a noble’s.”

Part 23

Feeling dizzy after his inner ear was taken out, Quenser did his best to hold onto the upside-down boat.

He looked up at Azureyfear as she crossed her arms atop the broken main wing of a fighter, he suppressed the urge to vomit, and he asked a question while trying to catch his breath.

He did not know what was right and he did not know what good buying time would do.

Nevertheless, he ignored Kevin next to him and simply moved his mouth in a daze.

“Even so, why would you go this far? Why would you try to…no, why would you actually betray the Legitimacy Kingdom to acquire a Second Generation?”

“Betray? Betray!? Me? Oh, dear. I am simply trying to remove the pus as a proper member of the Legitimacy Kingdom. My brother should know exactly what I mean.”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

Heivia yelled and pulled his handgun from its holster, completely ignoring the situation.

He did not hesitate to aim it at his own family member, but Azureyfar’s expression did not change.

She snapped her fingers and the earth seemed to transform below them.

The sea split directly below her and a giant black form appeared. This time, it was not an Object. It was a stealth submarine that resembled a large ship made of origami.

It was a one hundred meter strategic weapon.

There was nothing Heivia could do as the waves tossed him around.

The handgun slipped from his grasp and he could only manage to hold onto the boat for dear life.

Meanwhile, the girl in a blue dress laughed as she stepped elegantly onto the submarine.

She grabbed her long skirt in both hands, bent her knees a little, and lowered her head.

“Now, let us end this long, fruitless history of conflict, brother.”

She held what looked like a perfume bottle in her hand.

It contained Blazer Bouquet. Centuries before, a princess had been pursued by a nation after a revolution. At her small, small wedding, that same brand had been thrown into the chapel as a merciless Molotov cocktail. That hateful wine was made by mixing together several rose petals and allowing them to ferment and brew within flower nectar.

Azureyfear’s eyes glittered as she sprayed that scent of revenge on her neck and wrists.

“I believe I will start with the Whore of Vanderbilt who has manipulated you, brother. I will crush the false buds of reconciliation, dialogue, and peace and use that solemn result to whip the lax Winchell family into shape. And before the Vanderbilt family can recover from the shock, I will settle this once and for all. And with the Destruction Fes at the lead!!”

She spoke of a nightmare.

But would it really be a dream when she had that ultra-mobile Second Generation that was freed from the yoke of gravity and could escape the grasp of any other Object in the world?

That girl had reached for the stage setting that could grant her nightmarish dream.

The look on her face made her seem possessed by a vengeful spirit.

Namely, the vengeful spirit of the history that tied together the Winchell and Vanderbilt families.

“This is a war for peace, brother.”

“Dammit…”

“I will bring glory to the Winchell family as the hero who removed a seed of global destruction from this planet!! What greater desire is there!! If this is not the duty of any with Winchell blood in their veins, then what is!? Heh heh heh. Hee hee. Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!”

“Goddammiii

Chapter 3: A History of One or the Other > > South Atlantic Civil War of Emergency Succession

Part 1

The next battlefield was in the South Atlantic Ocean.

The battle was to defend the Vanderbilt lady and her civilian cruise ship from the Destruction Fes.

Frolaytia's response was simple.

First, she sent the Baby Magnum ahead at its naval speed of more than five hundred kilometers per hour.

Quenser and the others in the maintenance battalion gathered their surviving ships, stopped by a Legitimacy Kingdom base on the southern tip of Africa, and used transport planes to fly to Saint Helena, an isolated island in the South Atlantic Ocean. After borrowing some naval forces there, they regrouped with the Baby Magnum at the island, finally began the Object maintenance, and prepared to arrive on the scene and fight.

It had of course not been an easy journey.

If the Destruction Fes had been waiting for them, its anti-air weapons could have destroyed every last aircraft in midair. When the weight of death was bearing down on you the entire time, the flight was far from enjoyable.

"Listen up!!"

But Frolaytia Capistrano ignored that physical and mental weariness to raise her voice in the small aircraft carrier's briefing room.

"The greatest desire of the Legitimacy Kingdom military is to protect our people's lives, property, and honor and to destroy anything that threatens those things! That aspect of our fight remains unchanged whether our enemy is another world power or a rogue faction of our own. If Azureyfear Winchell's faction intends to slaughter civilians en masse in their desire to strike at the

Vanderbilt family over an old feud, then we will do whatever it takes to stop them!!”

Every one of them was worn down.

They had lost many colleagues and their morale had plummeted.

They were filled with the unpleasant mood of people being forced to work without pay.

But.

Oddly enough, none of them threw down their gun, tossed out their dog tags, and left the battalion.

“Currently, Celestial Flowers, the world’s largest ocean fireworks festival, is being held in the South Atlantic Ocean. Around five hundred civilian ships have gathered around the two-hull luxury cruise ship Rose & Lily for that festival. The Destruction Fes, which we speculate to be Second Generation, is approaching their location. If it arrives, we will have a true bloodbath on our hands, so I want to finish this before that happens.”

The enemy was a private unit led by Azureyfear Winchell.

Operating a Second Generation without relying on a Pilot Elite was estimated to require a crew of more than ten thousand. They had enough soldiers to fill an army division and it was to pilot just the one Object. And all of that personnel, equipment, and materiel would have been bought with the money she earned in her drug war.

Heivia and the others did not hesitate to oppose Azureyfear.

The fact that it was entirely remote controlled may have helped there. Blowing it away would not kill anyone, so the extra familial connection did not have to make it awkward. And if they destroyed this strange Object, the ridiculous war…no, personal feud would be over.

As usual, diagrams were projected on the white wall behind Frolaytia.

“Luckily, the Legitimacy Kingdom Second Generation Oceanic Driver was patrolling this area of sea and it put up a decent fight. It is the true ‘owner’ of the naval force at Saint Helena. Even as they worked to slow down the Destruction Fes, they gathered valuable data on the unknown Object. We can never thank them enough. Don’t you waste their efforts!”

The Oceanic Driver was a naval Second Generation that fought bravely with a laser beam main cannon. In addition to its reactor, it was equipped with several large-scale capacitors to leave no gaps in its rapid-fire when necessary. It also had several ballast tanks attached to its outer perimeter that could be filled with or emptied of seawater to intentionally shift its balance for incredibly nimble and rapid turns.

But it was no match for the Destruction Fes.

The Destruction Fes was fully remote-controlled and had no Pilot Elite. Freed from the restrictions of the inertial Gs, its movements were like lightning. More than just its top speed, it had ultra-sharp footwork and could cut back and forth unnaturally quickly. The difference was too great to be seen, like a cutting-edge stealth fighter taking on the Wright Brothers’ plane in a serious dogfight. It fully surpassed the biological limits of a manned machine. Before the Oceanic Driver could even place it in its sights, the Destruction Fes would slip into its blind spot and unleash cruel attacks that gouged into its armor.

The Destruction Fes was supported by the air cushion float directly below its main body, but it also had three insect-like legs attached in a reverse Y-shape. Those legs had booster-like devices covering the sides and they provided explosive mobility. The pure white torrent they produced looked more like a liquid than a jet or plasma.

The difference in speed was overwhelming.

The battle was so one-sided that the field itself seemed to shift out of place.

Even so, the Pilot Elite had not ejected even in the very, very end.

Over one hundred thousand innocent civilians sat behind the Oceanic Driver, so it had to hold its position until the Baby Magnum's battalion caught up. Every minute and every second mattered. And that determination to continue fighting had sealed the Pilot Elite's fate.

No one instructed them to, but when the Object exploded, every soldier in the briefing room saluted.

Even Quenser and Heivia.

Frolaytia gave a short sigh and then abandoned her pride. She would use everything available to her. There was a lot she had to prioritize above her own self-respect.

She did not hesitate to do something unthinkable of a soldier.

She gave the floor to a mere student.

"Quenser, what do you think?"

"Its main cannon is a large caliber low-stability plasma cannon, but that isn't what I'm interested in."

After moving to the head of the room in place of his commander, Quenser paused the tragic footage, rewound it, and then pointed at something with a laser pointer. He had no intention of mocking the Elite's death. That Elite had lost their life passing on this baton, so they had to look it straight in the eye and chew it down to the marrow.

"It has some parts on the back that look like peacock feathers, but they don't seem to be related to the boosters. If it's supposed to be a high-mobility Object that uses the incredible speed of its footwork as its greatest weapon, they would have eliminated anything that would create air resistance, so these are odd. And as you can see when zooming in, they are a collection of some sort of giant speakers."

"Speakers?"

Heivia looked puzzled, so Quenser nodded and continued.

“They’re an acoustic weapon. That’s what messed with our heads back with the boats.”

“Oh, goddammit. Just remembering it is making me feel nauseous. That thing was bad. It wasn’t just the ears or the head. It felt like I’d been punched in the head so hard I was going to vomit.”

“The Destruction Fes also destroyed our aircraft carrier fleet, but a low-stability plasma cannon can only fire in one direction and can’t apply damage equally to one hundred ships. These things produce a great noise at a regulated frequency. That causes micro-vibrations in the target and destroys them a lot like a harmonic scalpel. The weaker welded points of the metal are burned through on the molecular level and then the entire ship breaks apart and sinks.”

“So you’re saying the Destruction Fes has two main cannons?” asked the Princess.

She was going to directly confront this enemy, so it was a life-or-death issue for her.

Quenser gave a troubled look.

“At that power, I don’t think it could directly damage an Object.”

“Yeah, we’re still alive,” added Heivia.

“Although we might have been turned to mincemeat if we were closer and didn’t have any cover. We didn’t survive due to luck. It was because those ships sank in our stead.” Quenser rejected the other boy’s optimistic view. “If anything, I’m betting that one’s used to hold its opponent in place. Just like how the Spectre Q&A detonated the air to stop the Princess from moving. That said, it’s powerful enough to sink an entire fleet at close range. For flesh-and-blood humans, being exposed to that would be the same as being thrown into a human meat mixer.”

“That’s a dangerous combination.”

“That it is, granny. Not only does it have footwork too fast to keep up with, but it has an additional weapon to slow us down. As the gap in speed grows infinitely wide, the Destruction Fes will move to

our blind spot and safely fire its main cannon. It really comes down to relative speed, but it'll feel like fighting an enemy that can manipulate time. I doubt there would be any way to win in a straight fight."

He paused for a beat before adding a "but".

The projector displayed the situation in the South Atlantic. The map displayed where the Oceanic Driver had sunk and where the five hundred civilian ships were gathered for the world's largest fireworks festival. It also showed the Destruction Fes on its way to kill the Vanderbilt lady along with countless other civilians and it showed the Baby Magnum and Legitimacy Kingdom forces moving to intervene.

The student took all that information in.

He looked across everyone's faces and cast the die of fate.

"If we give up, a hundred thousand civilians will sink into a sea of blood and the Oceanic Driver's resolve will be wasted. Also, Frolaytia has ordered us to keep that from happening. I will obey that order. I'm not telling you to die here. I'm telling you to draw out every ounce of strength needed to survive. So what will you do? It's a thin, thin thread, but we have the chance left to us by the Oceanic Driver. The rest is up to you. You need to decide here whether you're going to hear me out."

No one objected.

Ten minutes later, the worn-down soldiers all took their battle positions.

Part 2

A two-hull ship was exactly what it sounded like: a ship with two hulls.

The Rose & Lily was constructed from two cruise ships measuring four hundred meter long. They were lined up side-by-side with a few passageways connecting them. The ship had been made so large to secure more storage space and deck space, but this increased the resistance against the waves and water which reduced the fuel efficiency.

One of the hulls bore the Winchell family crest and the other bore the Vanderbilt family crest. In reference to some legend or another, a single sword was stabbed into the middle of the central connecting passageway.

A lot could be said of its origins, but none of that mattered at the moment.

The main player of the Celestial Flowers fireworks festival was not that lodging ship. Instead, it was the many ships belonging to fireworks craftsmen that were spread out around the cruise ship.

The event itself was mostly entertainment for the rich nobles.

It was the same as the nations that spent massive sums of money exploring the moon or deep sea in an older age. “We have the technology to do this.” “We are this wealthy.” “We have plenty to spare, unlike the rest of you.” By implicitly stating those things, they could build up a mistaken long-term strategy against their foreign enemies. By consuming an unnecessary countermeasure budget like water, they could indirectly torment their enemy without firing a single bullet or shell. In that way, this too was a type of war.

Of course, that was nothing more than an excuse and a pretext.

The nobles loved wine more than water and sought casino chips

more than cheap meat, so they were not about to begin any stingy self-sacrifice even if the world was going to be destroyed tomorrow. They might flick some bread crust over to a charity, but they would never allow their great fortunes to be stripped from them in the name of “justice” or “self-restraint”. They would put any amount of work and argument into allowing themselves to live their hedonistic lives.

Five hundred ships had gathered around the Rose & Lily for the Celestial Flowers fireworks festival, but popular opinion had been guided on multiple levels so this festival of gluttony would not provoke the ire of the commoners.

On the Rose & Lily’s portside deck – the one engraved with a rose – the Vanderbilt lady sighed and leaned back against the railing overlooking the dark sea.

Normally, over ten thousand fireworks and the canopy of the artificial aurora would have decorated the sky while far too much food to eat was lined up and a world-class violinist provided the music for an elegant dance.

But that plan had been called off, so the sky and sea were both dark.

The nobles in dresses and suits were muttering amongst themselves and extra focused on their own safety. Not only could they no longer see the Oceanic Driver which had been sent out to protect them, but fragments of information were showing up concerning the unknown Object headed their way.

“It apparently has to do with the conflict between the Winchell and Vanderbilt families.”

“Then what does it have to do with us? I-I know. I don’t mean anything too much by it, but is it too late to request a helicopter? Yes, wouldn’t it be lovely to go for a flight between the fireworks and the aurora?”

“Don’t be stupid. If it really is an Object, its anti-air lasers will tear us to pieces. And it would be hard to reach land this far out at sea.”

The young lady could tell many eyes were glancing her way in the darkness.

(How careless. This is an age of war, so you never know who is after your life the second you take a step outside a safe country. In fact, being in a safe country doesn't guarantee anything. And yet they fully believe they alone are safe.)

When they left their safe country despite the danger, were they contacting people from another world power to tear down both sides' prejudices and reach a true mutual understanding that could stop war without military might?

Or was it merely a sham without any of that framework?

It seemed the VIPs gathered on the Rose & Lily did not know how to tell the difference.

"We can never let this happen, but…hypothetically. Hypothetically speaking, just to put our minds at ease…how powerful is this Winchell Second Generation? If it is on a rampage, who can stop it?"

"Why is this happening? This wasn't part of the plan. I was promised absolute safety…"

"My family will never die! Ancient documents show it going back for five hundred years!!"

"But just because something was fine yesterday doesn't mean it can't fall apart tomorrow, right? Ah…ah ha…ah ha ha ha ha…"

The pressure grew.

They had lost their fangs and claws and they had grown round and fat, but when it came to their own safety, these nobles could be more tenacious than greedy wolves. They would never say it directly, but through various hints and metaphors and with the help of the secretaries by their sides, they were telling each other the following:

"This comes down to the historical conflict between those two

families, so why do we have to be caught in the crossfire?"

"I only care about the survival of my family and I am indispensable as far as that is concerned."

"The Winchell girl will be satisfied if we offer Vanderbilt to her as a blood sacrifice."

"That means there's something we can do here."

"If we tie up that young lady and hand her over to the crazed lioness, we can show her we have no intention of opposing her."

If those unpleasant nobles had been the only people at the fireworks festival, she would have abandoned them already, but unfortunately, there were also plenty of unrelated commoners. She would have trouble sleeping if she also abandoned parents who had saved up their limited pay and leave to bring their families or the couples who had secretly bought a ring for this occasion.

"Now, then."

The Vanderbilt lady removed her back from the deck's railing. She grabbed a glass of nonalcoholic champagne from a tray held by a passing maid in a long skirt and she calmly walked through the darkness while drinking it. The nobles were too busy practicing their wise-looking poses to think and parted in front of her without saying a word.

For the time being anyway.

Once the scales of the situation tipped too far, those ladies and gentlemen would restrain the girl's body with more vulgar looks than thugs in an abandoned part of town.

Perhaps to show a sign of neutrality within the strained atmosphere, a courageous member of the commoner crew spoke to her while wiping down the glass door leading inside the ship.

"Lady, where are you going?"

"Unfortunately, it seems there is still something I must do."

Faithful young men like that were the Legitimacy Kingdom's treasure. As a noble, she could not allow those people to be killed needlessly.

She left the empty glass with him and entered the ship.

Azureyfear Winchell was behind this attack. Her goal was undoubtedly the annihilation of the Vanderbilt family and the death of this young lady as a symbol to hold up to the world. But could Azureyfear really have accomplished such a grand plan on her own? And could she really have kept it hidden for so long?

There was a possibility that something was still hidden.

Someone may have given Azureyfear a helping hand to benefit in some way.

And the White Lily of Vanderbilt had already heard someone say something curious.

The truth may have been surprisingly close by.

Part 3

The starry sky covered the dark ocean of the South Atlantic Ocean.

Quenser, Heivia, and the others were rushing around within the gray aircraft carrier. The soldiers were all pulling out the motor-equipped rubber boats made from the Armadillos. They stopped up on the deck and Heivia looked out to the horizon.

“I can already see the lights of the boats. Those people on the cruise ship are paying a visit to the garden of death.”

“…”

“Hey, Quenser.”

When the other idiot did not answer, Heivia asked about it.

Despite being an idiot, Quenser had a thoughtful look on his face.

“Did I do something wrong in a past life or something?”

“What?”

“It’s just…well…I’m not sure how to put it! First that Black Uniform named Meena and now the sexy little sister Azureyfear. Why!? Does every girl I flirt with end up growing a demon’s tail from her cute ass!? I’m scared! Now I can’t hope for any new love!! I’m gonna end up afraid of love!!”

“Talk about awful taste. Don’t tell me you actually had a thing for that monster Azureyfear. Ugh, just the thought is giving me the creeps.”

“Of course I did! She was walking around in a bikini and she even kissed me on the cheek! Yes, I’ll admit she was suspicious! But I thought there was more to it than that!! Why wasn’t there some kind of twist!? Stupid, stupid, stupid!!”

During that hopeless conversation, Heivia hit Quenser on the head.

The student started to complain, but then he noticed something.

The Princess was walking over while surrounded by several maintenance soldiers. She was on her way to board the Baby Magnum after its hastened maintenance.

They did not even need to speak.

As Quenser and the Princess passed by, they reached out and slapped their hands together.

They were shifting their focus to the coming battle even if they had to force it.

“Oh, hell. This has already started, so I guess we have to do it.”

“Yeah. And if I don’t show off to my fiancée every once in a while, she’ll lose interest in me. Let’s blow up that remote-controlled Destruction Fes as the world’s biggest firework.”

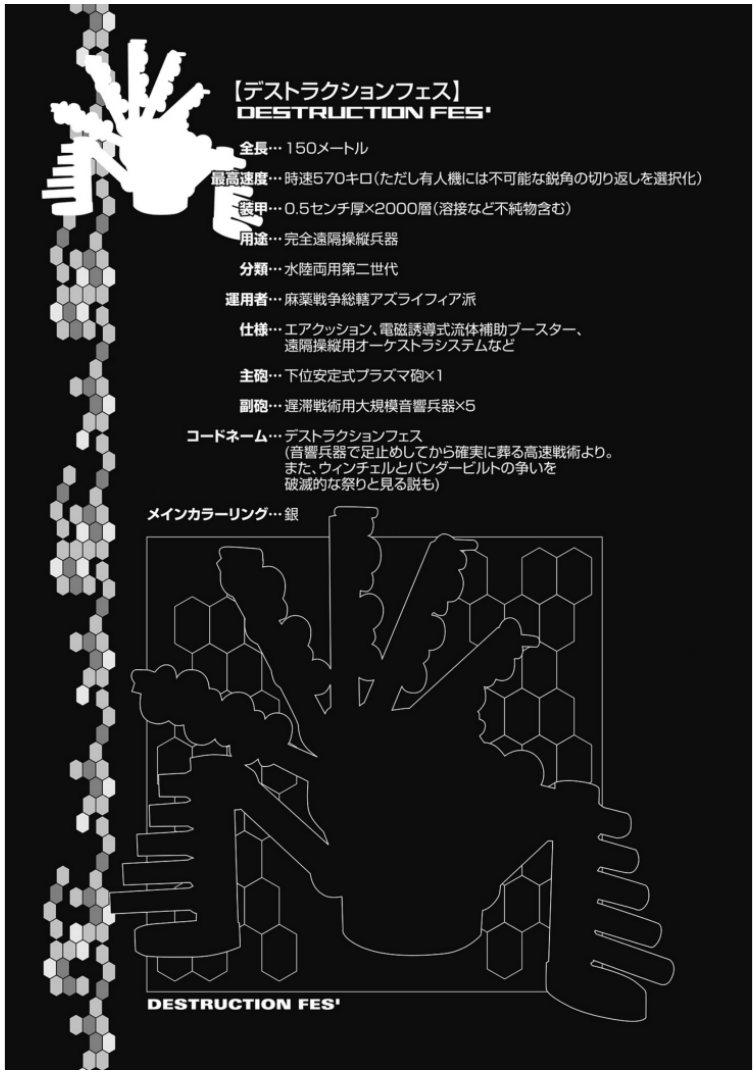
“And once that’s over, it’ll be time to give Azureyfear some sexy punishment!!”

“Are you still going on about that? It’s scaring me!”

“You might have your girlfriend over there, but this is the only motivation I’ve got here!!”

Quenser and Heivia joined the other soldiers by throwing their rubber boat into the dark sea and then jumping down from the flight deck. After starting up the large motors, the boats scattered in different directions instead of heading in a single group.

There was a simple reason for this.



Frolaytia spoke to them over the radio.

“We can’t use the White Flag here and the Destruction Fes has an overwhelming advantage. Listen. We can only roll the die of death to find out who dies first. Even if that turns out to be those of us here in the flagship, you all need to keep going. Don’t let them end this while just sitting there!!”

In addition to the low-stability plasma main cannon, the

Destruction Fes could emit an ultra-high frequency acoustic weapon from its peacock feather-like speaker units. At close range, that could destroy an entire fleet or stop an enemy Object.

Anyone in an exposed rubber boat was out of the question.

However, the risk of being torn apart remained even inside a steel warship.

They did not know who would die first, so they could not allow the entire battalion to be wiped out at once.

That said, this was a lot like digging a bunch of small trenches and hiding inside them so they would not all be wiped out by a single bomb. There could be no hard feelings no matter who the bomb made a hole-in-one on. That was the only option available to them.

“That’s a hell of a way to motivate us. What ever happened to clean wars?”

“…”

“What is it, Heivia? Quieting down now isn’t going to trick anyone into thinking you’re an intellectual.”

“Why didn’t the Destruction Fes…no, why didn’t Azureyfear finish this off right away? Average speed for an Object is five hundred kph and hers is a Second Generation with its high-speed mobility as its main selling point. The attack should have begun before our patched-together cardboard fleet showed up.”

“Because she actually wanted Knight Quenser to stop her!! Heh. These delinquent girls are always turning their damaged eyes my way!!”

“I don’t care how hard you try, there’s no making that failure into some cute little girl!!”

“Then how should I know? I don’t know how nobles think. Maybe she wants to finish off her sworn enemy herself. Maybe she thinks it would damage the ‘legend’ if the Princess showed up and one of her stray shells happened to sink the Rose & Lily instead.”

“Or…she might just want to kill my fiancée in front of me,” suggested Heivia with a bitter look.

Then static ran through the two idiots’ radios.

Someone they did not remember having permission was sending a transmission over an open line.

“Heh heh heh…”

It was a noble laugh that sounded like rolling a piece of candy on the tongue, yet it also contained endless sadism.

“Azureyfear!!”

“How do you do, brother? Where do you think you’re going? Might it be a desperate struggle to save the Bitch of Vanderbilt that I have let live for the time being.”

“…”

Quenser looked to his own radio and prepared to send a certain signal to the Princess in the Baby Magnum and Frolaytia in the small aircraft carrier.

But…

“It is no use. No one can capture me. In fact, my own whereabouts mean nothing to the Destruction Fes. Even if Azureyfear Winchell is taken prisoner or killed, the ten thousand operators, the stealth submarines scattered around the world’s oceans, and the satellites in orbit will continue the fight. Not that I expect you would be able to hunt me down anyway.”

“Who do you think you are? Do you think you have an infinite stock of privilege as a noble?”

“Ah ha ha ha!! Brother, you are the one that needs to bear the responsibility and duty of Winchell. I am merely taking on the debt you failed to pay back. But don’t feel bad. We are family, after all.”

Winchell and Vanderbilt.

War and peace.

What was the reality on both sides and what were the delusions on both sides?

At the very least, it seemed Azureyfear wished to open Heivia's eyes. And to do so, she wanted to kill in front of him.

Heivia clenched his teeth and a report came in from the Princess.

"The Destruction Fes is approaching from thirteen kilometers southwest of my position. Once it is within ten kilometers, I will engage it."

"What? Isn't that around where the Oceanic Driver was sunk?"

Quenser grasped the meaning of the data quicker than anyone else.

"Hm. You were acting like a god, but it looks like you weren't all that almighty."

"Commoner, I possess a tolerant and merciful soul, but you are not needed in a conversation between nobles. Know your place."

The student ignored her and continued.

He was expressing his thoughts, something everyone had equally.

"Don't act so full of yourself when you're terrified of getting hit right in the ass. The Oceanic Driver was a Second Generation with several large capacitors in addition to its normal reactor. That allowed it to fire its laser beams with no gaps, but even after it was sunk, it might have had a program to launch an attack from beyond the grave using the massive power left in the capacitors. You were slowly making sure that wasn't the case. You were afraid of being hit with a surprise attack!!"

Quenser's guess was that the Oceanic Driver could not actually do that. No matter how powerful the capacitors and transformers were, they were no replacement for the extraordinary reactor. But Azureyfear's faction had feared that risk. They had feared that formidable foe.

The Oceanic Driver had done more than fight to the death.

Even after its death, it had given the rest of them the chance they needed.

The Rose & Lily and the other five hundred ships were still intact with the hopelessly powerful Destruction Fes so close, but that was undoubtedly thanks to the time bought by the Oceanic Driver. The defender of Saint Helena had done its duty and fulfilled its mission.

How could they let that go to waste?

“Don’t let her get to you, Heivia. That thing isn’t perfect. They’re afraid like normal and they’re putting together countermeasures like normal! It’s nothing more than a normal Object! Our ally proved that. We just have to fill in the gap between the ideal and reality!!”

After saying that to his awful friend, Quenser shouted into his radio.

“Frolaytia, please get started! This is the starting line! We can still end this with zero sacrifices!!”

A massive machine passed by the rubber boats.

It was the Princess’s Baby Magnum.

The mountainous silhouette of the Destruction Fes turned their way in the darkness. The peacock feather-like acoustic weapon units were spread out wide.

A thunderclap-like noise continued without end.

It stabbed at their ears, but Quenser and the others were not knocked out at this range. However, the acoustic weapon’s power would grow the closer they got to the source. They could see the Baby Magnum’s speed dropping as if it was being buffeted by a fierce wind or invisible pressure.

“Dammit! This thing’s dangerous!!”

“Are all these waves due to the ocean surface vibrating? Shit! If we

don’t pay attention, we’ll be thrown from the boat!!”

“Hee hee. Hee hee hee hee. The Orchestra System is working well. The ten thousand wolves will now devour the lone Elite.”

“Now you’re really pissing me off. I’ll show you what true piloting looks like.”

The Destruction Fes was not going to pay her any heed in a normal fight.

It was unmanned, so it could ignore the limits of inertial Gs that bound a manned Object. The boosters attached to the side of the insect leg-like units provided overwhelming speed and reversals while the acoustic weapon’s “wall” kept the enemy Object from moving. Their relative speeds widened to fatal levels, so it almost felt like it could control time. The Destruction Fes would calmly circle around to the blind spot of the Baby Magnum’s cannons and unilaterally pummel it to death.

“Eh heh heh. Heh heh heh. Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha!!”

Azureyfear must have had the same destructive vision in mind because her laugh reached the entire army over the radio.

But she was wrong. Quenser had a different vision in mind.

“It seemed strange once I thought about it.” He stared at that goddess of victory from the rubber boat. “That acoustic weapon uses countless speakers to create a wall of noise that vibrates the target, shakes and tears apart the molecules, and causes it to rupture at the weakest points, like the welds. But Objects move around at an average speed of more than five hundred kph. Even more so with the Destruction Fes since its high-speed mobility is its selling point. In that case, you can’t ignore how sound works. Even if you’re emitting the optimum wavelength, that wavelength can be stretched or squished depending on the situation.”

“You mean the Doppler effect?” asked Heivia.

“That means the Destruction Fes’s speakers have to emit a wavelength that takes into account the distortion due to the

Doppler effect. It has to accurately read in the relative location and speed of its target. It has to do that initial checking and correction before emitting the sound, and that of course has to be done with something faster than sound."

Quenser waved the radio in his hand.

"Namely, electromagnetic waves. As I'm sure you can guess from the existence of the term 'Doppler radar', electromagnetic wavelengths can't escape the Doppler effect either. And while the wavelengths are different, light and electromagnetic waves are pretty much the same thing. First it emits microwaves in every direction to see how they're distorted between itself and the target. Then it uses that data to calculate out the corrections needed for the acoustic weapon and sends out the corrected waveform at high volume. …To put it another way, restricting those initial microwaves will nearly defang the acoustic weapon."

So…

"An acoustic weapon that creates a wall of pressure that can even stop an Object sounds like a big deal, but if you think about the nature of electromagnetic waves, it isn't much of a threat."

Of course, simply using jamming was not going to help just because it was using radar. It was an Object, so it was essentially a large-scale military fortress in and of itself. It could force its way through your standard interfering signal.

But that just meant they had to think bigger.

Quenser snapped his fingers and pointed up into the starry sky.

"The Celestial Flowers fireworks festival just so happened to have an interesting event planned! A collaboration of fireworks and an artificial aurora created with the help of a space station!!"

Part 4

The civilian Venus-class space station was named the Princess Nikolaschka.

It belonged to the Legitimacy Kingdom's Organization for the Peaceful Use of Space.

It was currently 20:30 Greenwich Mean Time and the space station was in sector I-9 above the South Atlantic Ocean.

A giant blue planet was visible below and an endless expanse of darkness was visible above. Directions, including above and below, meant nothing in outer space, but since he had been born on the earth, the astronaut named Marcus still found it to be a strange and dizzying sight.

Those aboard the space station called it the "Fish Tank" because it had lab modules and solar panels installed at right angles around a thick cylindrical main shaft. Several more facilities were similarly attached to the slave shafts that branched off, so overall, it resembled a fishing hole's fish tank made from several rectangular wooden frames connected together. Those extra frames extended from the main shaft at 120 degrees intervals.

Wearing space suits and attached by a lifeline, the astronauts were clinging to the exterior of the station and working without the option of wiping the sweat from their brows.

They were working on a strange railgun that they referred to as the Debris Homer. Rather than an uncivilized military weapon that fired shells, the barrel opened wide and released a field of power to shoot back debris without touching it. It was a safety device to be used against the debris that arrived like a sandstorm at several kilometers per second.

"Marcus to control. The socket replacement is complete. It's a perfect job. This peaceful station has been transformed into a military facility. To be honest, it kind of want to break my arms

right now."

"Those SOBs are all insane. Don't they know this is a civilian station? I hate the smell of gunpowder. I came all the way up here to answer kids' questions over the satellite line while I throw paper airplanes! As a kid, I loved watching those shows while looking after my little brother, but now I feel like I've ruined it all!!"

"Stop it, Robin. Space development has always been a proxy war. We have to do this dirty work while the kids can't see us."

The countdown from control began, so they restrained their chatter. They relied on their lifelines to move along the station's exterior and reach the safe zone.

In that soundless world, the invisible stream of solar wind was bent and fired toward earth.

But the earth's atmosphere was effective. It protected the life living below from the threat of ultraviolet rays, radiation, heat, falling objects, and more. Most of the unnaturally bent solar wind was blocked by the ionosphere. Hazy red, green, and purple light danced over one portion of the blue planet.

Robin spoke while watching the light spread with an amoeba-like motion.

"An artificial aurora, huh?"

"That's not the main event here, Robin."

The aurora occurred when solar winds – massive amounts of plasma launched from the sun – collided with the magnetosphere surrounding the earth and gathered at either the North or South Pole. When they contacted the magnetosphere, the solar winds had their electrons and protons separated and those particles reacted with the ionosphere to produce light.

And a few side effects of the aurora had been noticed.

One of those was of interest here.

“Loss of electromagnetic signals in the polar regions.”

Robin may have been starving for a chance to lead a children’s educational program because he began explaining.

“Very high frequency communications and microwave communications will ‘vanish’ in the affected area. Although this might be the first time in history it hit an Object-level radar emitter.”

Part 5

Just as the Destruction Fes was ready to attack, it seemed to stumble a little.

Its acoustic weapon had cut out.

Instead, the night sea grew so still and silent it seemed to hurt the two idiots' ears.

"Ksshhh! Kssssshhhhhhhh!! Click!!"

Their radios were dead.

They could no longer hear the Princess or Azureyfear.

"What? So if the communications are down, does that mean its remote control is out too!?"

"It isn't that simple. I'm sure it's got multiple systems like lasers to cover this kind of thing. But it still had some effect!"

The Destruction Fes resumed moving a moment later, but they were not done doing things Azureyfear's faction did not expect.

The Princess's Baby Magnum rushed straight forward. As soon as the Destruction Fes's acoustic weapon was cut off, it seemed to have been released from the invisible pressure or fierce wind facing it. It had incredible speed, like a rubber band that had been stretched back to the limit.

No.

Technically…

"Thanks to the activated ionosphere, very high frequency waves and microwaves 'vanish' here. That affects the Doppler radar it uses to determine the wavelength correction it needs. After stumbling like that, it can't use its wall of sound anymore! Even if it scatters sound at random, it can't maintain the most effective wavelength!!"

The Destruction Fes was still incredibly fast, but the Baby Magnum was freed from its shackles.

It was freed from that hopeless field of relative speeds so different the enemy seemed to be controlling time.

The Princess could move.

She seemed to leap forward.

Blinding light crossed paths. The Baby Magnum and the Destruction Fes had both fired their low-stability plasmas cannons while taking evasive actions to the side. They had of course used their main cannons. It was like crossing lances in a jousting match.

The Princess just barely managed to dodge.

The Destruction Fes being remotely-controlled by Azureyfear's faction had one of the outer peacock feather-like parts torn away. It could be heard whipping through the air as it rotated through the dark sky like a metal tower.

It fell toward the cruise ship several kilometers away.

"Hey!" shouted Heivia from the boat.

"It's better than an attack from that thing's main cannon. More importantly, she hit! The Princess's attack hit!! Without the acoustic weapon slowing her down, she can shrink the gap between them. At this rate…"

The student trailed off when a bit of static ran through his radio.

"Quenser, something isn't right. The fact that you're getting this should tell you that."

"Wait a second, Princess… Why is the radio working? The artificial aurora should be killing the signal!"

"My radar was down for a moment, but it's back up now. The same should be true for them."

Quenser and Heivia looked up.

What was happening in that starry sky? Without the assistance of the space station, the Destruction Fes could resume its high-speed fight that made it feel like time had stopped.

Part 6

The astronauts had other things to worry about.

Marcus and the others were busy clenching their teeth as hundreds or even thousands of shards as sharp as a razor or box cutter rained down from outside the space station.

“Robin!”

“I’m fine. There’s no hole in the ass of my jacket. More importantly, what was that? A killer satellite!?”

Satellite-destroying satellites were exactly what they sounded like.

A satellite was launched for the sole purpose of destroying an enemy nation’s satellites. Some would use powerful lasers or electromagnetic signals to damage their sensors, some would fire rockets or missiles, and some would be loaded with explosives for a suicide collision. It was known as the saddest and most fruitless field of space development.

This time, it was a collision model. It took the same orbit as its target, used boosters or an ion engine to slowly approach, and then detonated itself.

Explosions had no sound in outer space. Without any air resistance, the shrapnel did not slow down. Plus, the slightest cut or hole could cause fatal damage to equipment or human life. It was a deadly sandstorm that approached in absolute silence. Perhaps only those up in space could truly understand how frightening that was.

“They’re scattering a ton of debris out here. That’s against the treaties.”

“The solar panels on Module C and Module D were taken out. They even blew a hole in one lab module.”

“But given the situation, I doubt this was an indiscriminate attack. They had to have been after the anti-debris cannon. Dammit. It hurt

aiming that safety device toward the earth."

Explosion after explosion tore apart the framework of the Fish Tank. The main shaft was still unharmed, so the entire station would not fall apart and their living space was safe. However, the damage to the parts exposed on the exterior was bad. The railgun and a few solar panels had been damaged and bent.

They could no longer provide support to those on the surface.

However, they doubted the enemy would withdraw. They had spare parts inside the station, so destroying the station and slaughtering its crew would be the quickest method of crushing any possibility of repairing and reusing the railgun.

"Here they come," muttered Marcus.

People in unfamiliar space suits were visible here and there. They had likely clung to the side of the satellite partway through its flight. They held rifles. The fingers of the space suit would not have fit, so the trigger guards had been cut away.

The astronauts had no way of knowing, but they were from Azureyfear's faction that was controlling the Destruction Fes with a worldwide data network using a large number of stealth submarines and satellites. Their reach extended to the deep sea, the surface, and even space.

"Wait, wait, wait!" shouted Robin. "We're civilians! We don't have guns!!"

"We don't have to do this their way. Robin, Anderson, you have your work lights, right? Twist the focus to concentrate the light on a single point. On my signal, let's all target their faces one by one."

"Our lights? Are we supposed to fight the bad guys with our light swords?"

"This is a lesson I've learned in my long time as an astronaut." Marcus quietly sighed. "When taking a commemorative photo in zero gravity, you mustn't use the flash. If you blind yourself, you lose your sense of balance and your body seems to move on instinct

when you stiffen up because you end up spinning around until you don't know which way is up. …Let's take them out in the same way."

In outer space, there was no need to force the enemy to the ground or knock them out. Once the enemy lost their balance, they could be thrown out into the emptiness of space. Even if they had attitude control boosters, the fear and panic of an out-of-control spin was not something they could break free of on their own. Without anything around to support them, they would helplessly continue their flight until their oxygen tank was empty.

"Their rifles are the same. If they pull the trigger in zero gravity, the recoil will flip them around. That would change if they pressed their backs against the station's wall before firing, but we won't let them do that. This is a civilian station, so if they want to fight a war, we'll have them do so elsewhere."

Part 7

Heivia loudly clicked his tongue as he stared up into the night sky from the boat floating in the dark sea.

“Is it siesta time on the station up there!? What do we do, Quenser!?”

“…”

If the Destruction Fes regained its full abilities, the Baby Magnum could not win. In fact, no Object on the planet could stand up to a Second Generation with that speed and maneuverability.

They needed to seal off its acoustic weapon without using the space station’s artificial aurora.

If they did not make this work, Heivia’s girlfriend and one hundred thousand more lives would be lost.

Quenser looked around and then brought his radio to his mouth.

(That’s it.)

“Princess! Hold on for now!!”

“That isn’t something you can do just because someone tells you to. I’ll do it, though!”

The two Objects began to move.

Once more, the din of the acoustic weapon ruled the battlefield.

Fortunately, the Princess had torn away one of the Destruction Fes’s peacock feathers. That created a dead spot in the acoustic weapon’s reach. The Princess continuously moved toward that outer edge and did whatever she could to not be swallowed up by that slowing pressure.

But not even that was perfect.

The Destruction Fes truly was fast. It always occupied the most useful spot and fired its low-stability plasma main cannon toward the Baby Magnum. As payback for before, it tore away one of the seven main canons and melted the spherical main body's armor with a glancing blow.

The intense noise must have been affecting the amplitude of the ocean's waves because unnaturally tall waves appeared all over, forcing Heivia to cling to the boat as he let out a yell.

"There's nothing stopping it anymore! What do we do, Quenser!?"

"If we can stop the electromagnetic waves that guide the acoustic weapon, we'll have the upper hand again."

"Your everyday jamming won't cut it."

"What about chaff? Fill the night sky with tons of thin metal and it will reflect the electromagnetic waves. Its radar will be useless."

"But where are we gonna find that!? That aircraft carrier was prepared in a hurry, so there won't be much left inside its fighters. And we'd need hundreds of tons of chaff to throw off an Object's control system!!"

But Quenser calmly tossed his radio to Heivia.

"That's your job."

"What?"

"Have you forgotten where you secret lover is? This is the world's largest fireworks festival. And do you know why fireworks are colorful? Flames change color when they react to certain chemicals or metals. Ten thousand or a hundred thousand should be enough. If they fire all of their fireworks into the night sky, it'll block the Destruction Fes's electromagnetic waves and thus its acoustic weapon! So beg her to do that for us! Hurry!!"

Part 8

Explosion after explosion sounded as colorful light filled the night sky.

“Honestly, don’t make it sound so easy.”

The Vanderbilt lady sighed inside the Rose & Lily.

The rose was the Winchell family’s symbol and the lily was the Vanderbilt family’s. That was enough to know what a close connection she had to the ship, but she was still only a guest at the fireworks festival. Winchell was the one running it and their maids were moving about through the ship. And since this was the “normal” Winchell family (i.e. not Heivia), it was not exactly a pleasant atmosphere for a member of the opposing Vanderbilt family.

(Well, Vanderbilt also has its issues with the main family and the branch family. And that’s only getting worse recently. I’m the only heir to the main family, so if I died, the riffraff from the branch family would gain more influence in the inheritance issue.)

And even if she had been the one running the show, it would have been unreasonable to have the fireworks prepared by craftsmen around the world fired randomly into the night sky while completely ignoring the original program.

She had only succeeded by working up the manager’s fears by eloquently convincing him that holding onto all the unnecessary explosives might be considered intent to fight, thus leading the Object to attack them.

For a noble woman, knowing how to protect her family without picking up a weapon could be seen as a necessity.

And the more she pushed things, the more her position on the ship was worn away.

The scales were tipping.

Once it crossed a line, the savage-looking nobles would tie her up and give her to Azureyfear as a present to ensure their own safety.

She did not have much time left.

But she could not escape Azureyfear by boarding a helicopter or lifeboat to flee the ship.

What could she do?

After some thought, she slipped through a staff only door.

Like all luxury cruise ships, the Rose & Lily had a large server and satellite communications facility for casino card readers and day trading. She stepped into the server room that had communications equipment lined up like shoe lockers or bookcases.

She compared the numbers of the many guest rooms with the letters on the servers and traced her fingers along them while walking through the room. She finally stopped at a certain point.

“This is the one.”

After the sudden attack from Azureyfear’s Object, quite a few voices had filled the party deck. Most had been groundless bluffs and ways of protecting oneself, but one of them had caught her attention.

“Why is this happening? This wasn’t part of the plan. I was promised absolute safety…”

(What a fool. I’m guessing he fanned the flames between Vanderbilt and Winchell, gave Azureyfear some help, concealed all sorts of information for his own sake…and then got caught in the crossfire at the very, very end.)

Once she took aim, she could more or less guess who it was.

Now she needed something to confirm her speculation.

The Vanderbilt lady pulled a handheld device from the chest of her

dress. She had borrowed it from those pretending to be spies in the Winchell Countermeasures Office. She connected it to the server's socket with a cable and monitored the communications of a certain room.

However, she was not intercepting the data from a suspicious mastermind's room.

As a noble, she had been taught not to do anything that risky. "I have no memory of that. My secretary or butler did it all." That was something all nobles had to learn.

However…

"If I place a camera in my own room, it doesn't count as spying."

That was why she was viewing her own room.

If the mastermind was fanning the flames between Winchell and Vanderbilt for his own benefit, then he would be constantly monitoring the actions of those in both families. If she could find some trace of that, she could find a clue leading back to him.

All of this qualified as justified self-defense.

Nobles and royals had to defend the people who served them, so what qualified as self-defense was quite broad. As per the concept of *noblesse oblige*, the greater one's authority, the greater their responsibility, so they carried the customary obligation to actively protect those under their care. Of course, just like the Island Nation's idea of Kiri-Sute Gomen, it was only ever interpreted in ways that benefited the privileged classes.

"Now, now, now. Who was it that assigned the rooms for this fireworks festival? Rather than breaking in after I checked in, it would be a lot easier to place me in a room that already had a data-stealing gimmick installed in the wireless router. Whoever was in charge of that must have been bought."

She had no specialized data processing skills, but she detected a suspicious looking entry on her device and sent it to the Countermeasures Office to hand it off to a great number of

personnel. She had no idea what kind of magic they used, but a long list of results came back in no time. They may have actively search out the technicians who had completely failed as a member of an organization and thus could not be left in the military. In other words, they were the kind of hackers that could only live in the world of a movie.

A somewhat vulgar smile came to the girl's lips when she finally spotted a certain name within the deep, deep electronic forest.

"I knew it."

It was the same as the person who had spoken on the party deck.

As one could guess from his careless statement, he was a Legitimacy Kingdom VIP who the press often targeted as a mass-producer of gaffes. She felt like the spinning compass was finally pointing in a single direction. She shifted her focus from the Rose & Lily's internal network to the external internet connection. After sending another request to the Countermeasures Office, another answer came back almost immediately.

She had asked for back issues of an electronic newspaper saved by one of the major communications companies.

She found an article from around when the conflict between families had grown beyond a secret feud and into full-on military conflicts.

(This is even more obvious. The Vanderbilt and Winchell families have conveniently clashed twenty-one times around the same time he made some kind of gaffe. That diverted people's interest from that less interesting news and allowed him to escape taking any kind of responsibility.)

Nobles and royals seemed to believe in bloodline above all else, but there were always exceptions. If a family was deemed unable to protect its people, the entire family would "fall" and lose its noble status. Or if an individual was considered an exceptionally harmful example to the public, they would be "banished" from their family. And when banished, producing any children could spread their

genetics and spark revolt during succession issues, so they would be charged with inciting rebellion. In other words, they were legally castrated. Heivia had gone against the wishes of the entire Winchell family and yet he had not been banished. That showed just how far one had to go to be banished, but it also meant that one could have the protection of their privileged class taken away if they did go that far.

This man had wanted to escape banishment.

But instead of closing his loose lips, he had covered it up with an even larger commotion.

This was a safety device for him.

No one from the heads of the families to the families' butlers knew what had started the centuries-long conflict between Vanderbilt and Winchell, but someone had definitely been using it in recent years.

"Now, then."

(Where should I strike to drive out some actual dirt?)

She decided on the things connected to the Vanderbilt family. And even then, she limited herself to the sports clubs, beauty parlors, restaurants, and salons she normally visited, not the private property. If they all had a similar setup to her room on the ship, the data would all be gathered in one place after traveling through several different servers. If necessary, she could have Heivia check on the places the Winchell family tended to visit.

Simply gathering the data was meaningless. It had to be analyzed to use it. If he was gathering the data on both families in one place and quickly determining how to drive the two families into an even larger conflict each time he made a gaffe, he would need greater analysis than even the weather forecast.

And the more a unique weapon was used, the more one could see the unique outline of the person using it.

The facilities that could pull that off were limited and the people with connections to those facilities were even more limited.

Once she knew what she was after, she only needed to send a request to the Countermeasures Office. Then she would only have to wait. They would use their specialty to swiftly hunt down the flow of money behind this. They would find all the necessary evidence.

She did not think this would fully resolve the problems between Vanderbilt and Winchell, but she could nip at least one disaster in the bud.

But…

"…?"

(The communications cut off now!?)

She was not using the sketchy Wi-Fi at a café. She was using the satellite communications antenna the cruise ship used for casino card reading and day trading. She doubted the signal would go down that easily.

Just as she began to think the mastermind was blocking the signal, the answer reached her.

She heard a loud explosion.

"Oh, all those fireworks Master Heivia asked me to have launched are acting as chaff."

The pieces of copper and other metals had reached a certain density in the air and started to disturb the signal. It ended up harming her position, but she could not resent it when it was a request from her fiancé.

She could no longer send a request to the external Countermeasures Office.

She could not rely on those experts, so she would have to find another way on her own.

Instead of finding the analysis facility from the multiple points of data leakage, she would have to find some more direct evidence.

(The wireless router they tampered with in my room. Whether they modified the software communications log or the hardware, it would be fastest to get the device itself.)

That meant her adventure was not yet over.

She would have to return to her room when she had no idea when the nobles would give into their fear of Azureyfear, overpower her like a mob, and make a human sacrifice out of her.

She gave a truly annoyed sigh, but immediately took action.

It was the weakness introduced by her love for her fiancé that drove her to action.

And as she left the server room, she muttered a certain name.

“Flag Eggnog…”

That man was almost certainly guilty.

He was aware he often made gaffes, but rather than shut his loose lips, he had thoughtlessly and arrogantly decided to hide his problem behind a war between nobles. He was truly a terrible example for his people.

And with that in mind, the young lady moved her lips as a trail of tense sweat ran down her cheek.

“Or perhaps I should call you ‘Your Excellency’. Isn’t that right, Mr. Royal?”

Part 9

The fireworks swept away the darkness of the sky and sea.

A deluge of light covered it all.

An incredible number of explosions overlapped with each other and filled the space, but that was not enough on its own. The copper and other metals used to color the flames acted as chaff and once more prevented the Destruction Fes from using the electromagnetic guide for its acoustic weapon. Depending on the range, that weapon could tear a fleet to pieces or stop an Object in its tracks, but it was dead once more.

“This is our chance, Quenser!” shouted Heivia on the boat.

“But it isn’t a guarantee.”

Despite the opportunity, Quenser did not lose sight of the situation. He continued coldly analyzing the information that worked against them.

“This only took out the acoustic weapon, so it still has its legendary speed. The Princess can’t win unless we take out those special boosters on those three legs.”

“……
How many more climaxes is this gonna have?”

“We need to observe, Heivia. This closed the gap a little, so the Princess can last a while longer.”

The problem was not the air cushion propulsion device below the spherical main body. It was the insect leg units with the boosters attached to the side. By firing those all at once, it could pull off those lightning-like back and forth movements that a manned Object could never reproduce.

And those boosters were not emitting flames like a rocket.

“We mentioned it before, but it’s shooting a liquid out. Seawater would be the likely suspect, right? It would be pumping it up and firing it out. If that’s how it gets its propulsion, can’t we just dive down and block up the pump opening?”

“I doubt it’s that simple,” muttered Quenser. “Heivia, the Destruction Fes uses an air cushion propulsion device.”

“What does that matter!? Aren’t the boosters the problem!?”

“The air cushion suggests it’s meant for use on water and on land. Then what does it spray out for its speed on land?”

“Oh.”

“Did you think they can’t use it on land? Not a chance. Azureyfear said she would exterminate the Vanderbilt family and that she would start with your girlfriend. Even if she joins with the hawks of your family later, they’ll want an amphibious Object that can operate in all environments to hunt down all those nobles scattered around the world. A purely naval Object doesn’t mesh with their design philosophy.”

“Then what? When it’s on land, does it stick a tube into the ground to dig up some underground water!?”

“…”

The student thought for a moment.

“Heivia, with the radios down, we can’t rely on our handheld devices’ maps. I need to investigate this based on memory, so help me out.”

“What could you possibly do now!?”

“I want to follow the route the Destruction Fes has taken in this battle.”

The two idiots used the rubber boat’s large motor to travel through the nighttime sea with no real landmarks. The dark sea would have thrown off their sense of direction, but the reflected colorful light of

the fireworks messed with their senses in a different way.

Still, they somehow managed to find a remaining band of bubbles.

They stopped the boat and Quenser scooped up some seawater in his water bottle.

“What are you doing? It’s not like we have an examination kit!”

“Eyesight will be enough.”

Quenser showed Heivia the bottle as it reflected the fireworks.

“See those black specks?”

“What the hell are they?”

“Iron sand, most likely. The Destruction Fes’s boosters were never meant to spray water. They gain thrust by firing dirt like a railgun or coilgun. And of course, they use the iron and iron sand in the dirt as a ‘framework’.”

“Wait. You mean…?”

“Seawater conducts electricity, but that wouldn’t be strong enough.”

“Yeah, you don’t really hear about people making magnets out of seawater.”

“So just like mixing in diamond dust to increase the strength of an industrial water cutter, they’ve mixed in some iron sand to give themselves that ‘framework’. That way they can fire the water out with even more power.”

Heivia looked to the distant sea.

Even now, the battle between the Baby Magnum and Destruction Fes continued. A stray shot could fly toward the cruise ship and other ships at any time.

The sight was enough to squeeze at his heart, but he also noticed

something else.

“Damn that fraud. I was taken in by the impressive appearance… I was taken in by Azureyfear’s fighting style.”

“Yes. It may look like it’s freely moving across the battlefield with unbeatable speed, but it’s really only fighting while moving back and forth across an extremely limited area. It’s retrieving and reusing the iron sand its boosters have scattered around. Of course it is. If it doesn’t have a filter to absorb the rare metals dissolved in the seawater, it can only use its limited stock during a naval battle. It isn’t replenishing its iron sand out of thin air.”

“B-but waiting for it to run out would be too reckless. The Princess is only barely getting by…no, she’s being worn down bit by bit. If she lets her guard down for just a moment, she’ll be hit straight through the center. We can’t hope for a long-term battle against something so fast.”

“I know that and that’s not what I’m going for.” Quenser tapped his temple with his index finger. “We don’t have to wait around for it to run out. If we take that stock away from it, it’ll stop in no time.”

“But how?”

“We already have the answer. We’re going over there next, Heivia. Get the boat moving.”

Before asking for details, the delinquent noble did as he was told.

The rubber boat almost seemed to hop along the nighttime sea filled with dancing colorful lights.

They were nowhere near an island or continent. They were surrounded by ocean in every direction, so the only things they could be approaching were the Objects, the aircraft carriers and cruisers where Frolaytia’s group waited, and…

“We’ve finally gotten them directly involved,” said Heivia as he operated the large motor that doubled as the rudder. “Welcome to the Celestial Flowers fireworks festival, I guess! Since we’re here, maybe I should go pay that lonely kitten a visit!!”

“If you’re going to ask a girl on a date, pay attention to your hair and clothes. Show up in that sweaty uniform and she’ll slap you.”

“Ha ha. You don’t know the first thing about nobles, Quenser. She’ll play rock, not paper.”

“Hey, if you’re going to get all lovey-dovey about your girlfriend, can you at least pay me? It sounds like more work than being a fortune teller under an overpass, but I’m willing to listen if it pays!!”

There were five hundred ships, but they came in all shapes and sizes. The biggest were the Rose & Lily and about ten other cruise ships that rivalled an aircraft carrier in size. The smallest were more like wooden river-crossing boats with plastic roofs. Some had such simple designs that taking them out to sea would clearly be suicide, but the cruise ships likely supplied water, food, fuel, and other materials like they were air refueling tankers.

The hundreds of ships were packed in over only a few kilometers, so it looked like a boat bazaar filling a river. It grew difficult to continue on even with the rubber boat. Quenser and Heivia climbed from the boat to a ship and jumped from ship to ship from there.

“That’s weird. I don’t see anyone. They’re all launching their fireworks without anyone onboard.”

“That’s convenient. They’re probably all gathered on the cruise ships. A panic here would cause the ships to start running into each other and they’re all packed full of fireworks. Who knows how far the damage would spread.”

The world-class fireworks craftsmen had likely known what would happen to radio signals when they launched their products, so they were mostly being launched by timers or wired connections.

“More importantly, where are we supposed to go!? Tell me already!!”

“To that!”

Quenser pointed into the distance where a giant structure seemed to

lean over several ships.

“The wreckage of the acoustic weapon’s peacock feather the Princess tore off! It’s a giant speaker, so it has to have giant magnets inside. And a ton of them!!”

The Destruction Fes mixed large quantities of iron sand in with the seawater to fire it out like a railgun or coilgun.

Quenser wanted a large number of magnets.

Therefore…

“This is everything we need. Now we just need to set it up.”

“Wait a second!! Watch out!!”

As soon as Heivia cried out, a blinding light swept across the ships.

It was the Destruction Fes’s low-stability plasma main cannon. A fair distance from the two idiots, it slipped between a few of the cruise ships, yet dozens of the smaller ships vanished in the light. Some had simply been vaporized and others had been set alight by the intense heat, igniting the fireworks.

A chain reaction of large explosions followed.

Flowers of unnaturally colored flames meant for entertainment blossomed here and there. For the ones the size of a small fishing boat, the explosive force of the fireworks must have overpowered the ship’s weight because they were launched into the night sky like rockets. As their silhouettes fell apart in midair, a few of them approached Quenser and Heivia.

“Shit! Jump in!!”

Quenser reflexively crouched down, but Heivia grabbed his collar and threw him into the dark sea. As soon as they both plunged into the thick water, a muffled explosion and a blinding light erupted overhead. The fireworks in the falling boat and in the one they had been standing on must have ignited.

The explosions continued with no sign of ending, so the flames may have spread to the neighboring boats.

Quenser tried to rise to the surface in search of air, but Heivia held him down and forced him along. They only surfaced after diving below another ship and reaching a spot that seemed to be shielded from that ground zero.

“Bwah!! Cough, cough!! Cough, Cough! Ohaheh!!!!”

“I have no idea what you’re trying to say, but I’m not accepting any complaints. This spot won’t be safe forever either and we have no idea which ship will blow up next. If you have something to do, then hurry up and do it!!”

“Cough! Cough, cough!! Ugh… But if the Destruction Fes’s stray shots are finally ending up here…”

“Yeah, the Princess isn’t perfect. She’s gradually being pushed back this way. If she wasn’t protecting that final line, that probably would’ve been a direct hit on the cruise ships!”

Part 10

The Vanderbilt lady left the Rose & Lily's server room, walked down the corridor, and quickly doubled back after turning the first corner.

Men in black clothes and sunglasses were clearly headed her way. They were still walking rather than running, but they were clearly hurrying toward a certain destination. Plus, they either had special armor or mechanical strength enhancements because their suits swelled out from within and their feet sank deeply into the carpet.

She pressed her back against the wall by the corner and took a breath.

The wall and floor were trembling from the sounds of the fireworks and an unpleasant sweat appeared on her brow.

Just as she prepared to turn around and take another path, an elderly male face appeared nearby.

"Hyah!!"

"Pardon me, lady. I did not mean to frighten you."

He was gentle-mannered, but he wore the same black clothing. White gloves covered his dried twig-like fingers and he held a small handgun with a silencer attacked.

He held it close enough that the muzzle nearly touched her belly and he smiled.

"Please come with me, lady. You will understand why soon enough."

"Surely you aren't planning to take me to His Excellency of the Eggnog family. These are not my formal clothes and my family insignia is in my room. I doubt I would be given permission to have an audience with him."

"Do not be silly. Do you really think we would put His Excellency

or his honor in danger, lady? This will all fall under the category of ‘I have no memory of that. My secretary or butler did it all’.”

“…”

As expected of a royal servant, he was well trained.

(Now, will they tie me up and sacrifice me to Azureyfear or will they directly silence me while disguising it as the former?)

She placed a confident smile on her lips, but she was filled with anxiety on the inside.

There truly was nothing more she could do.

However, her pride as a member of the Vanderbilt family did not allow her to let it show.

She took her first unwilling step at the insistence of the silencer-equipped gun.

A moment later, she heard a few muffled gunshots and the old man collapsed to the floor after receiving some powerful blows to the back.

The Vanderbilt lady had no idea what had happened, but the situation did not wait for her to catch up.

“Lady, please get down.”

She heard a dignified female voice.

Someone gently slipped past the young lady as if clearing the way for her, but then she fired another shot into the head and heart of the collapsed old man. The woman held a fully-auto machine pistol. It of course had a silencer equipped. She pulled the slide back, poured a bit of mineral water into the gun through the ejection port to increase its airtightness, and did not hesitate to poke her head out from behind the corridor’s corner.

Flag Eggnog’s pawns had been rushing this way, but they were eliminated almost too easily. Those royal bodyguards had been a

little lacking in skill due to their overconfidence in their equipment, but making it look that easy showed just how skilled this woman was.

The muffled sound was much quieter than the fireworks outside, but it squeezed at the young lady's heart much more. Those blasts were meant to summon death, so they were fundamentally different.

The woman had silver hair and wore a chic maid uniform with a long skirt.

The eyepatch covering one eye and the machine pistol were dangerous looking, but something else caught her attention.

"Oh? That maid uniform… Isn't that the kind used by the maids that serve a Winchell family manor?"

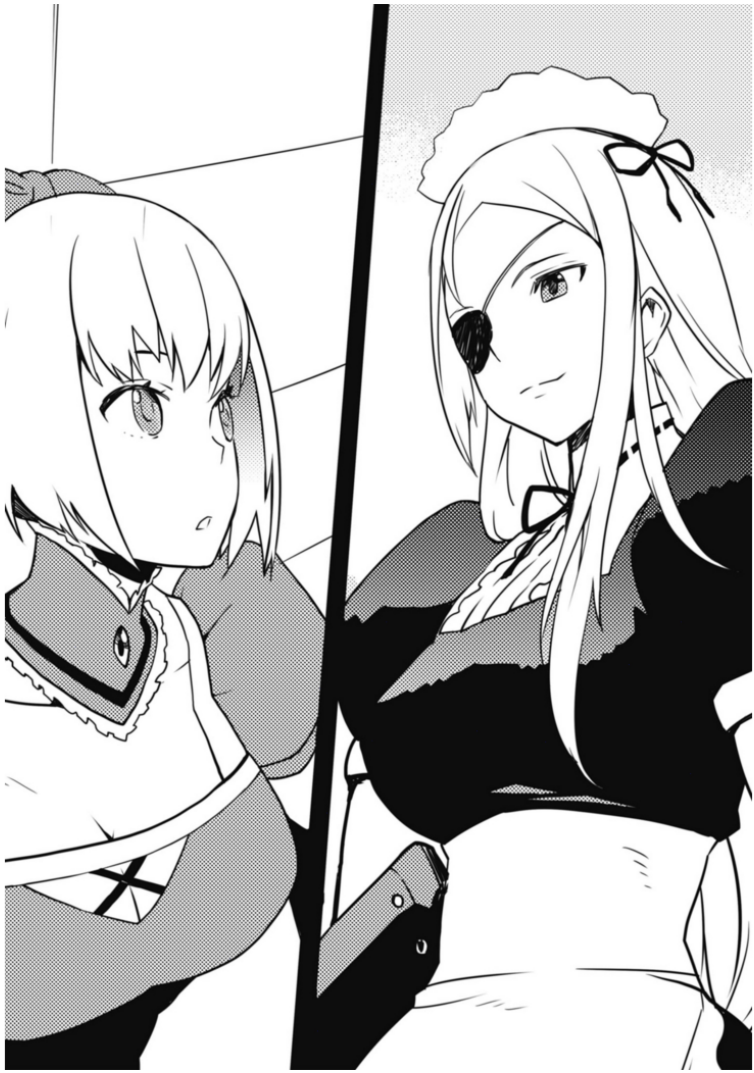
"My apologies, lady. I still haven't introduced myself, have I? I am Karen I. Winchell. Not only have I seen you a few times at our residence, but I believe I handed you a glass of nonalcoholic champagne at the party earlier."

"Oh…um…"

"Do not worry about it. I am merely a maid. While I have been graciously named a member of the Winchell family, it means nothing on the bloodline front. My middle initial stands for 'imitation' and the Winchell name is a title awarded me by my master."

A few more maids wielding guns joined her.

As someone who was constantly being escorted, the Vanderbilt lady could tell this was a bodyguard arrangement.



She thought for a moment.

“I have a few questions.”

“Ask away.”

“First, I advocate disarmament and strive to resolve the Legitimacy Kingdom’s internal and external problems with words rather than weapons.”

“We are aware this is not your preference, lady. But we will do what is in the interests of our revered and beloved Winchell family as a whole. Losing you here would be a major loss to Winchell.”

“Second, the people you defeated here are connected to the Eggnog family.”

“Lady, there are always loopholes. They carefully created an environment that left no connection back to their master in case they had to dirty their hands. But that also means that their master cannot accuse whoever might strike back at them. After all, they have made sure he and the criminals are entirely unrelated. There is no chance whatsoever of a battle breaking out over revenge. The system prevents it.”

“Three, are you prepared to oppose the overall will of Winchell and assist Vanderbilt, their official enemy?”

“I must admit, that one is harder to answer.”

The eyepatch maid smiled a little, but her lips twisted fiercely as she continued.

“But if you kick the bucket here, that snot-nosed brat will cry. I’m saying I can’t stand to even imagine that look on his face, lady. If it means protecting that smile, I’m more than willing to be branded a traitor.”

That was all she needed to hear.

The Vanderbilt lady and the Winchell maid shook hands.

“Lady, we are your pawns. Please tell us what our next move should be.”

The young lady also dropped her almost coldly elegant speech.

“Take me to my room. If Flag Eggnog is intentionally pitting our families against each other as damage control for his gaffe, he will definitely be monitoring my actions. I need to retrieve the wireless router he’s tampered with and find the evidence linking back to him in either the hardware or software.”

Additional insufficiently trained footsteps approached.

The maids from hell checked the remaining ammunition in their silencer-equipped machine pistols and poured mineral water in through the ejection port to increase the sound suppression.

“What shall we do about any obstacles on the way?”

“You should of course avoid combat as much as possible. I’m a pacifist after all.”

The young lady’s position had not changed.

But…

“And if that doesn’t work, just slaughter them all! Slaughter every last person who stands in the way of my marriage with Master Heivia!!”

Muffled gunshots rang out.

A girl in love had endless possibilities.

Part 11

The main battle between the Baby Magnum and the Destruction Fes approached as Quenser and Heivia watched, but that did not change what they had to do.

They wanted the gigantic speaker used as an acoustic weapon. More specifically, they wanted the electromagnets inside.

The two idiots grabbed onto a nearby ship and climbed onboard again. They jumped from ship to ship among the eerily colorful explosions to reach the fallen peacock feather.

“If the lineup of fireworks is destroyed, won’t the chaff vanish and won’t the acoustic weapon come back to life?”

“Even if the fireworks completely stopped now, it wouldn’t immediately eliminate all the metal in the air.”

“Shit! The Destruction Fes is really pushing forward now. It’s coming this way!! Is it trying to crush us by running us over!?”

“That’s actually exactly what we need! Help me out, Heivia. Let’s keep our work to a minimum!!”

They had finally reached the wreckage of the acoustic weapon leaning over several of the ships.

Even if it was made to be put together or broken down by human hands, Objects were made to withstand a nuclear blast and it would be difficult for the two of them to manually tear it apart. They spotted a speaker that had separated from the entire peacock feather due to the impact of the fall and Heivia lifted it up using a crane-like device attached to one ship to transfer cargo. Quenser dragged some plastic gas cans and metal drums from the nearby ships and attached those “floats” to it with wires.

“Throw it now! It won’t sink like this!!”

“Damn this thing’s scary. If I’m not careful, I think our ship might

flip right over."

With a loud splash, they tossed the giant speaker – or rather, electromagnet – into the dark sea.

Quenser than borrowed one of the cables used to send signals to the fireworks.

"We don't have a power source to match an Object reactor!"

"We don't need one! The electromagnet will still work as long as it has power! …Yes, yes. The ship's large diesel engine will work as a generator. If I connect it here…!!"

The Destruction Fes arrived a moment later.

Dozens and even hundreds of ships broke apart as easily as styrofoam as it fiercely tackled them. It was going to skim right past Quenser and Heivia to hit the Rose & Lily in the center. And it would set off the fireworks and shrapnel scattered around it, so their human bodies could easily be turned to mincemeat.

The two idiots scrambled from ship to ship, trying to get as far away as they could.

But they made sure not to jump into the ocean and for good reason.

The Destruction Fes seemed to pitch forward as it rapidly lost speed.

The electromagnet had stolen all the iron sand it relied on for its speed.

The Destruction Fes mixed iron sand with the seawater to create the framework it needed to fire the water out like a railgun or coilgun for the massive thrust it needed. So what if a powerful electromagnet sucked up all the iron sand, leaving only the pure seawater behind?

The answer was simple.

The Destruction Fes could no longer use its boosters.

It arrived right in front of the Rose & Lily but could not take the last step, just like a fierce dog held by an invisible chain.

However, its target was a fattened luxury cruise ship.

An Object's main cannon could easily send it to a watery grave.

They had to settle this before the Object began thinking more clearly.

"Go, Princess…"

Worried for his fiancée's safety, Heivia ignored the fireworks going off all around him and raised his voice. With the metal for the colored flames acting as chaff, their radios did not work. His voice would not reach her, but he yelled anyway.

"Blow it awaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaayyyy

“What is it now, Quenser!?”

“This isn’t right. What is this? What does it mean?”

He was looking at the main spherical body near the top. Specifically, at the entrance hatch. It should have only been for decoration on this remote-controlled model, but it was irregularly opening and closing like a goldfish’s mouth or gills.

“Ah.”

What if?

Unlike a manned Object, the fully remote-controlled Destruction Fes did not need an oxygen supply system. It did not need a circulation system like the Princess had that used caustic soda to remove the carbon dioxide from the exhaled air so it could be reused again and again.

“Ahh.”

What if?

If the Destruction Fes was taking in oxygen, it would introduce a fair bit of risk. For example, if the dozens of bulkheads along the boarding tunnel to the cockpit could be opened and then closed one at a time in order: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5…n. That would carry fresh oxygen from one “room” to the next. Of course, without a filter, that method would not protect against a nuclear attack.

“Ahhhh!!”

What if?

Then why would the Destruction Fes even want oxygen in the first place?

Wasn’t it unmanned?

And if not, who was onboard?

Part 12

The scent of roses filled the small cockpit.

That may have been because she had sprayed the wine of hatred on her skin and hair to cover up the rusted iron smell.

Azureyfear Winchell wore the kind of full-body skintight suits that Pilot Elites wore. Its design was reminiscent of blue mourning clothes with a long skirt. A thin smile could be seen on the lips covered by a translucent veil and a trail of blood dripped from the corner of her mouth.

She was not a Pilot Elite, so she could not actually pilot the Object. The control system was still reliant on the Orchestra System that used tens of thousands of people in dozens of stealth submarines and satellites.

Normally, her presence there would have been unnecessary.

Pilot Elites had been thoroughly optimized in unspeakable ways, but not even they could endure the burden of the inertial Gs produced by the Destruction Fes. Boarding that Object was more than just reckless; it was suicidal.

Then why had Azureyfear done so?

She sat in that tiny and cramped cockpit with her limbs sprawled out limply and her breathing far too shallow.

Red blood dripped not just from her mouth, but from her nose, ears, and eyes too. Nevertheless, the Blue Rose smiled.

“Honestly, what a hopeless brother.”

The conflict between the Winchell and Vanderbilt families could not be stopped.

It had continued for centuries and it would likely continue for centuries more.

She had no way of fighting that, so she had reached a certain conclusion.

“If he intends to push aside all the many other candidates and inherit the Winchell family, then he cannot be so indecisive.”

A hint of happiness filled the Blue Rose’s face.

“Winchell or Vanderbilt? Your own sister or your lover? The time has come to choose.”

If she had simply brought the issue to him directly, Heivia would likely have insisted that he would protect it all, that he would not lose his family or his lover, and that he did not care if that made him indecisive.

But that gray decision would create many enemies. He could easily find himself ostracized by both Winchell and Vanderbilt.

She could not let that happen.

She had said from the beginning that she was taking on the decision her brother should have made.

“Now, brother. Please work towards your own happiness.”

She did not have the courage to publically celebrate his marriage.

Unlike her brother, she could not boldly claim she would bring an end to a centuries-old tradition.

Nevertheless, she had made her decision.

Since her indecisive brother would not, she would choose his lover over her in his stead. If the son of Winchell risked his life to protect the daughter of Vanderbilt, he would have the starting point he

needed to make an attack on his seemingly impossible task.

“Kill me and continue forward!!”

Part 13

And…

And…

And…

“Finally…”

Quenser removed the binoculars from his eyes.

He was not even listening to the exploding fireworks or the screams of the small ships being blown away around him.

“Finally.”

He looked to the Baby Magnum and Destruction Fes as they were lit by the multicolored flames.

“Finally!!”

His thoughts seemed to explode.

Quenser Barbotage ignored the awful friend by his side and yelled into the heavens.

“Yahooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!! It’s here!! The Azureyfear purity and redemption fever is heeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeere!!!!!”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait,” calmly cut in Heivia. “You have no proof. That was all in your head!! And even if it is true, it doesn’t remotely make up for the fact that my sister led a drug war, infected safe countries, shot her bought Black Uniforms to silence them, and blew up a fleet with her secret Object!! She’s one of the biggest criminals out there! She’s the perfect example of an evil girl!!”

“Shut up! I don’t care about any of that! I won’t rest until I get some punishment time with your sexy sister Azureyfear!! I’m not gonna

let her quit while she's ahead by dying a noble death here. Let's do this!! Let's drag Azureyfear out of there!!"

The next thing Heivia knew, Quenser had attached a parachute harness to himself. It was likely a leisure item meant for parasailing from the back of the ship. He also borrowed a large emergency hand light that came equipped with a radio, a hand-cranked generator, a large capacity battery, and a rescue strobe light.

"Quenser!?"

"Oh, this'll affect you too, but no complaints, okay?"

He kicked the lever to get the ship started. Quite a few ships had been crammed together, but the Baby Magnum and Destruction Fes had cleared things out quite a bit. The ship scraped against the panels and chemical materials floating in the water, but it quickly exceeded 100 kph.

They could be crushed by an Object at any moment, but Quenser did not hesitate to pull the parachute's cord amid the intense wind produced by their speed.

"You might end up being my brother-in-law!"

"Now you're just creeping me out!!"

The wind struck the parachute and it opened wide. Quenser was thrown from the ship and floated twenty to thirty meters into the air.

The Princess's mouth had to have been flapping wordlessly as the parachute came into contact with the Destruction Fes while it took a sharp turn.

The cloth got tangled up on the base of the low-stability plasma main cannon and caught there.

Even if it had been slowed, the Destruction Fes was still moving at about 400 kph. That was faster than the Island Nation's high-speed rail system. It should have torn the human body to shreds.

But Quenser was wearing a parachute that intentionally distributed the weight and a harness that attached to various parts of his body. When skydiving – specifically, in the HALO jumps from extreme high altitude – the parachute was opened during a free dive of around 400 kph. In other words, when used correctly, he could survive that.

“Ha…hah…hah!! Gh…Ha ha!! Wait for me, you damn cutie! I’m not letting you quit while you’re ahead. You’re going to pay for tricking us, sinking our fleet, and blowing away the Oceanic Driver. I’ll make you cry until your face is covered in tears and snot and you rue the day you were born! Let’s introduce ourselves to each other again, young lady!!”

He clung to the base of the main cannon, climbed up, and cut away the tangled parachute that was acting as a lifeline. Once freed, the idiot relied on the emergency hand light to begin moving atop the spherical body.

The Baby Magnum had lost its chance to fire, so it was simply moving back and forth with quick footwork. He had a feeling it was aiming a main cannon right at him, but he figured he was imagining things.

He only needed to move about ten meters.

However, he felt like his organs were being squeezed out of him and his vision quickly narrowed from every direction. He gave up on choking and found it was easier simply not breathing at all. This truly was not an environment conducive to human life. If he let his guard down even a little, he thought he would be thrown out into empty air.

Entering the Destruction Fes was easy.

To obtain oxygen, it was opening the bulkhead hatches in order: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5…n. One would open and then close, then the next one would. That brought the fresh air in from small room to small room.

But that method allowed foreign objects in as well.

“Cough…cough!!”

He coughed up some blood and barely managed to arrive at the hatch.

He wiped some blood up with his trembling fingertips and wrote something next to the hatch. Then he tied the hand light’s strap to a protrusion near the hatch and activated the rescue strobe light on the side.

“Let’s do this, you piece of shit. I’ll teach you just how cruel society can be.”

Quenser threw himself into the tunnel when the hatch automatically opened and then leaned against each consecutive bulkhead. He continued moving deeper and deeper toward the cockpit.

It may have lost the boosters that used iron sand and seawater, but it could still produce the speed and inertial Gs of a normal Object.

It squeezed at his organs and he could see the edges of his vision growing red. He also felt an intense urge to vomit. He doubted he would last even a few minutes in this environment.

But that few minutes was all he needed.

Once he reached the cockpit, he only had to do one thing: embrace Azureyfear who had chosen isolation and pull the ejection lever.

Part 14

Azureyfear Winchell breathed shallow breaths in the small, cramped space.

Her mind was like a narrow thread on the verge of snapping. She was using all her strength to remain conscious because dying in an accident would be meaningless. She needed for Heivia Winchell to kill her himself to show he was willing to cut down his own family to protect his family's old enemy if it was the right thing to do.

That would be the first step toward stopping the conflict between the families.

She was giving a push in the right direction to the boy who, unlike the Blue Rose, had taken Vanderbilt's hand and declared the conflict wrong.

Everyone else claimed it was justified because it was a centuries-old tradition, but her brother had followed his heart and announced that those centuries had been wrong.

That true hero had stood firm in the face of powerful opposition.

She was proud of him for drawing out that courage when no one else had been able to.

(And yet he's such a fool.)

Azureyfear had detected the foreign object.

Someone had grabbed onto the Destruction Fes and had successfully gotten inside.

(If he saves me, everything I have done will be for naught. He will lose the first step toward stopping the conflict between Winchell and Vanderbilt. His marriage will have to be put off even longer…. He knows that, yet he still makes the indecisive decision. That must be where his heart leads him.)

All of her efforts were being wasted, yet she felt her entire body relaxing.

Oddly, she had been waiting for this moment.

The final bulkhead opened and a boy in a Legitimacy Kingdom uniform rushed into the cockpit.

“Yahoo!! Quenser, your knight in shining armor, has arrived! Now, young lady, are you ready to fall in love?”

The Blue Rose of Winchell completely forgot about the pain from the intense inertial Gs.

All expression vanished from her face and she shouted at the boy who had realized the truth and come to protect her.

“I didn’t want you!!!!!”

But Quenser was not about to let that get to him.

He replied with a sharp look on his face.

“I’m not saying I want to be your boyfriend or marry you or anything. I just can’t let you off the hook after everything you’ve done! Some sexy punishment time is still waiting for you!! Should I go with ropes, whips, or candles? Hell, why not go with a little of everything!?”

“Are you an idiot!? No, really. Are you an idiot!? I prepared dozens of stealth submarines, satellites, and the fastest Object ever!! And you’re here to trample on all that effort while thinking with your dick!?”

“Oh, get off your high horse!! After running a drug war, building an Object, sinking a fleet, and destroying the Oceanic Driver, do you really think everyone’s going to go along with what you want!? You’ll look much better with all your efforts ruined as you cry pathetically on the ground and beg everyone for your life!! More importantly, I’m pulling the ejection lever. We’re getting out of here! This is finally over. Plus, we have to share a parachute, so I have an excuse to hold you in my arms!”

“You can’t do that!! And what do you mean an ejection lever!?”

“Hm?” Quenser looked shocked. “Can I, um, ignore that as the airheaded comment of an ignorant noble girl?”

“This isn’t a cockpit.” Azureyfear revealed a shocking truth. “The control system is handled by the Orchestra System managed by ten thousand people scattered around the world’s oceans. I had screens installed so I could monitor the situation, but this is only the box where the cockpit would normally have been installed. Why would they install a single button or lever?”

“……

His thread of hope had vanished.

The two hundred thousand ton Object continued moving at four or five hundred kph, applying intense inertial Gs that rivaled those of a fighter jet.

It was like a fierce compressor using artificial gravity.

And they could not get out☆

“We’re deeee

That equipment did not belong to any unit Quenser knew of.

Nor had it come from the Baby magnum.

“…is the Legitimacy Kingdom’s Organization for the Peaceful Use of Space.”

He did not recognize the voice, but he knew it was someone who had been fighting alongside them.

“This is the civilian Venus-class space station named the Princess Nikolaschka. Can you hear this? We saw the signal from the rescue strobe light and read the writing in blood near the Object’s hatch.”

Part 15

Astronaut Marcus placed his hand on the station's exterior while looking down at the giant blue planet.

"The bloody instructions next to the strobe light were right."

An unused module had been attached to the battered station.

It was bigger than an industrial refrigerator and it had the Winchell family emblem on it.

"As I'm sure you can tell from this transmission, we're hitching a ride on your system. We finally managed to capture your satellite and work out the communications format you were using. That allowed us to interfere in your control system. You can't use your weapon anymore. That Orchestra System came back to bite you."

To cover the entire world with a large number of satellites, they needed a large number of contact points. That allowed someone to open the satellite's cover, plug in a new cable, and begin a cyber attack from within the system. There was nothing anyone on the surface could do about that, but things changed for someone up in space. Plus, they had all too much experience matching their relative speed and retrieving a satellite thanks to all their rendezvouses with multi-stage cargo rockets.

None of it had been difficult.

Before Quenser Barbotage had rushed into the cockpit, he had left some bloody "insurance" by the hatch. The space station's astronauts had read it from orbit and had perfectly carried out the task given to them.

The Orchestra uses submarines and laser communication satellites.

Take control from above.

He had summed it up with those short sentences and the astronauts had quickly located and retrieved a satellite with a receiver antenna

and laser rod aimed at both the scene of the battle and the ocean.

“Brave Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers, thanks for providing a distraction and buying some time.”

Robin asked him for a high five, so Marcus pressed his back against the station and complied.

Marcus watched his colleague spinning from the recoil and finished his statement.

“It’s all over now. It’s time you paid for bringing the earth’s conflicts up into peaceful outer space. It’s time you paid dearly.”

Part 16

The fireworks continued exploding both in the night sky and near the water's surface.

On the Rose & Lily's outdoor party deck, the middle-aged royal named Flag Eggnog was sweating bullets.

What was this?

What had happened?

What in the world was going on?

Under Azureyfear Winchell's command, the Destruction Fes had been preparing to kill the members of the Vanderbilt family and everyone else here, but that monstrous weapon had come to a complete stop. That in itself was a good thing, but how many problems still remained? Wasn't there some other chain of bad news even after that thing stopped?

He received a whispered reminder from a servant whose black clothes were unnaturally swelling out from within.

"The Vanderbilt lady."

"Oh, goddammit!! That's right! She's trying to get that wireless router! If we don't get rid of that, it'll be analyzed and eventually lead back to me!!"

The bodyguard sighed because he had made sure to whisper the reminder and yet the gaffe machine had shouted loud enough for everyone to notice.

The royal seemed to be easily excitable and he had not noticed his mistake. In fact, he began muttering inside his fatty mouth.

"No, that isn't it. Oh, no. Oh, no. If I don't trigger a major incident between Winchell and Vanderbilt, I can't distract everyone from what I said at that press conference! That goddamn press

conference! Why do they upload the same news to video sites so many times!? I'll hunt down and kill every last one of them!!"

"Due to the electromagnetic interference, we cannot currently contact the outside world."

"I can't believe thiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiis!!"

Flag realized people were quickly distancing themselves from him. He was letting things slip left and right, but no one wanted to end up in a royal's sights because they had overheard his secrets, even if he was the one being careless.

Or perhaps they simply wanted nothing to do with a VIP who was on the decline.

"Ksshh!!"

That was when some unnatural static ran through the bodyguard's earpiece.

He was a truly loyal man.

"A radio transmission has come in for you, Your Excellency."

"How? I thought the signals were being blocked!?"

The bodyguard did not know the answer, so he could only answer with silence. He removed the earpiece and held out the radio itself he kept on the back of his waist. Flag Eggnog snatched it from him.

"Hello, Your Highness. Do you know who this is? It's one of the Martini Series."

"Oh! From the Information Alliance, you mean!?"

The bodyguard was just about ready to abandon the gaffe machine and run off. If it was found out a member of the Legitimacy Kingdom's royal council had a connection to their enemies in the Information Alliance, he would be charged with more than just treason. It was possible he would be executed right in the palace.

“H-how did you get this line through?”

“We are the Information Alliance. Do not underestimate our primary desire. But to reveal the trick, we used a directional antenna just above the ocean’s surface to get a signal through despite the Legitimacy Kingdom’s fireworks jamming. Ah ha ha ha. That should tell you we’re hiding in the ocean quite close by, but is it in a fishing boat? Or maybe a cruiser?”

“Oh, oh. The Information Alliance is giving me some valuable information for free. Does that mean you still trust me enough to help me out?”

“…”

He received a short silence in reply, but he seemed unable to judge what it meant.

“If I can use the radio, that speeds things up. Contact my rear guard waiting outside of this place. With the Destruction Fes in that state, I need to start a war in some other way if I’m going to make up for my gaffe. Even if that means poking at these two hornet’s nests.”

“About that, Your Excellency. This is very difficult to say, but…”

“What is it? Out with it. We’re on the same side, aren’t we?”

“Well, if you insist. …Isn’t it about time we stopped creepily pretending to be friends?”

He did not know what she meant.

His mind went entirely blank.

Finally, he let his emotions take over and shouted back with no real plan in mind.

“Y-you!! Wh-what!? What the hell is wrong with you!? Who do you think I am!?”

“Um, some bastard from an enemy nation we should probably defeat?”

He received what should have been an obvious answer.

“Your Excellency, the Information Alliance may have assisted you with the drug war and in the construction of the Plasma 177, that you’re calling the Destruction Fes, but it was not to help you achieve your goals. We of course had something to gain there and we of course have obtained that. You could say that we’ve reached our quota, that continuing any further would only be a negative for us, or maybe that we chose the wrong person to work with. …Well, you get the picture.”

“What…what are you saying!?”

“Sigh. This is one last favor, okay? You can think of it as payment for breach of contract if you like. The Information Alliance only ever wanted to gather, analyze, and store data on the micro-level mental structure of the noble Winchell family and on its macro-level opposition with the Vanderbilt family. You probably wouldn’t understand, but for a project known as Perfect Browsing, we wanted to gather data on as many sample incidents and disasters as possible. However, we were talking about the nobles near the top of an enemy world power. They are too well defended to easily send spies or saboteurs across borders, so we instead contacted some fool who would open the gate for us from within. The puppet you gave us, Azureyfear, was a very, very, verrrrry excellent sample. You could say the twisted side of the Winchell family is concentrated inside her.”

“…”

“Oh? So even someone as talkative as you can quiet down. Or did you finally catch on? We are experts at handling all kinds of information. Our privileged classes can manipulate stock prices with insider trading or rumors while the information illiterate will dry up and die. Spreading someone’s careless gaffe across the internet to ensure a specific target is too panicked to make a rational decision is hardly difficult for us.”

Flag Eggnog felt sweat pouring from his entire body.

This was not right. How could a royal be under someone else’s rule?

But this girl was from the Information Alliance, so she existed outside the Legitimacy Kingdom's pyramid hierarchy.

"We had thought it might be interesting to gain your trust by gathering and controlling data on Winchell and Vanderbilt to use you as a spy within the royal council, your highest decision-making institution, but it doesn't look like it will be that easy. Not bad, Legitimacy Kingdom. Your ability to cleanse yourself is praiseworthy."

He sensed that the conversation was coming to an end.

He was not in charge here, even though he was a royal.

"But it does look like we'll get an interesting sample. Perhaps I should name the file, 'Full-Speed Collapse of a Royal's Life'. Royals are supposed to be thoroughly protected by the preferential treatment of horribly biased laws, so how does one fall to the bottom? The chance to follow the process in real time is suuuuuuch a rare opportunity. We will be making good use of you, Your Excellency. Thank you very much☆"

"Owaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

He shouted in anger, threw the radio to the floor, and crushed it underfoot.

He was beyond worrying about gaffes. He ignored the negative attention he was receiving and pulled a handgun from his sleeve. It was a strangely-shaped self-defense gun that resembled a miniature stapler and held only a single bullet.

"I'll kill you!! I'll kill every last person who mocks me!! Grab your guns and follow me. First is that Vanderbilt girl with her evidence! Once that's over and my position is stable, I can start a war with the Information Alliance to-…"

He trailed off and looked over with bloodshot eyes.

The bodyguard who had been standing next to him a moment before had vanished.

He then heard a loud splash as something heavy fell into the ocean.

“I’ll kill them
aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaallllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllll

Flagg Eggnog set off with the men who had failed to run off in time.

Part 17

The ferocious Destruction Fes was now as still as a cicada skin.

Heivia blankly stared at it while unable to share any information via radio.

“What? Did Quenser actually save the day with love and courage? With that violent sister??? Please no. Is he really gonna be my brother-in-law!?”

He was nearly crushed by unease, but then he noticed the Baby Magnum making some kind sign.

The chaff from the fireworks continued to provide electromagnetic interference, so the Baby Magnum could not use its radio. Instead, it gently changed the angle of one main cannon. It reflected the light of the burning ships like a mirror in the sun, creating a regular pattern of flashing.

(Is that a message in Morse code? We’re getting pretty analog here.)

Something isn’t right.

That was a worrying beginning.

Was the Destruction Fes going to split open from within and evolve into some hellish second form? Was there going to be some strange claim about this only being 10% of its power? Was it going to turn out it had ten bodies and could only be slain with a holy sword purified by god? Heivia did his best to pretend he had not understood the message, but the Princess said even more.

The cruise ship.

“What?”

I have too much firepower to intervene.

“…”

Heivia looked around and his eyes stopped on a certain point.

The Rose & Lily was supposed to be a safe zone where his secret lover waited. The Princess could observe that supposed safety with countless cameras and sensors and she had determined “something isn’t right”.

The look on Heivia Winchell’s face changed.

With a manly expression, the noble grabbed the bundle of rope at his feet.

He pulled out a large knife and reflected the firelight to respond to the Princess.

He did not hesitate.

Help me out. I’ll settle this.

Part 18

The Rose & Lily had a two-hull structure.

That meant it kept its overall balance with two hulls arranged like a sleigh. Its name came from the rose as a symbol of Winchell and the lily as a symbol of Vanderbilt. It had been constructed based on the desire for the two families to get along.

Although the peace it was meant to bring was being forever pushed off like the release date of an extremely largescale RPG.

Inside, eyepatch-wearing Karen and the rest of the Winchell maids protected the Vanderbilt lady as they moved along.

Karen I. Winchell had cleared the path to the girl's room.

After retrieving the wireless router in question, they had broken the window and escaped that way.

The Destruction Fes had stopped and they were on their way to the heliport to use the opened sky route to reach the Legitimacy Kingdom's 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion where they would be safest.

However…

The last leg of that journey was to the heliport atop the corridor connecting the two hulls.

That flat piece of artificial land had a sword stabbed into it in reference to the legend of the two families.

That was where they were finally caught.

A chubby man with many bodyguards behind him was illuminated by the colorful fireworks and a disgusting smile appeared on his face as he spread his arms.

He was Flag Eggnog, first prince of the Eggnog family.

He was part of the royal council and thus the poor man was targeted by the press as a gaffe machine.

As a royal, he was positioned even higher than a noble.

“Hello, hello, lady. You certainly are making this exciting.”

“Oh? Do you have any idea how it feels to have assault rifles and even a shoulder-fired rocket launcher aimed at me just because I wanted to visit my own room? And I was fairly certain I still had awhile before checkout time.”

“Even if you do, removing equipment from the room is bad manners.”

“True. But what if it contains evidence of someone breaking some more important rules?”

The air strained under the pressure.

Several metallic noises sounded as Flag’s bodyguards and the Winchell maids protecting the Vanderbilt lady aimed their guns at each other.

But the latter group had a disadvantage here.

There was very little cover on the heliport and the bodyguards had special armor and mechanical enhancements under their clothes. It was possible a handgun bullet would be useless except for a headshot. In a shootout, the maids would clearly be worn down faster.

But the Vanderbilt lady did not look concerned.

That did not mean she was not concerned, though. She was intentionally making sure she did not look that way.

“You cannot avoid banishment, Your Excellency.”

She rejected him from a position of superiority.

“If you were innocent, you would not need to put together this sort

of plan. I do not even need to check inside the router. You have already made your mistake."

"Know your place, little girl."

Whether out of confidence or panic, Flag Eggnog pried open his lips.

Poking him a little was all it took for "the usual" to spill from there.

"Don't you know how the Legitimacy Kingdom works? Royals are everything in this world! Our prosperity has already been assured!! I am merely playing my part. I may cause some slight trouble, but that is for the best. It fills the stagnant council with activity, leads them to a swift decision, and provides good fortune to the Legitimacy Kingdom's people. What could be wrong with that!?"

The eyepatch maid feigned ignorance and asked a question while aiming her silencer-equipped machine pistol.

"Pardon me, lady, but that was a little too difficult for a mere maid such as myself. What did he mean?"

"Hm? He was saying he's about to be charged with treason and inciting rebellion."

"Nonsense. The nobles are given their position so they might support the royals to protect the many commoners. So fulfill your duty! You are supposed to be knights that raise your swords to fight for your king!!!!"

At this point, one could only be impressed with his stupidity.

He was even simpler than a soda fountain that produced the desired drink at the press of a button.

He claimed his gaffes filled the council with activity, but most likely that was the only compromise the others had found to handle the immense stress he brought them. Doctors focused on making money were likely constantly prescribing those around this man with stomach pills, relaxants, sleeping pills, and another stomach pill for all the other pills they were taking. If those people had heard this,

they would likely have applauded and immediately decided to banish him.

Of course, a storm of bullets would kill the girl no matter how emptyheaded the idiot was who had ordered it.

“This is over, little girl. You must pay for so arrogantly stepping onto this royal stage when you were born a mere noble.”

“Lady, as an uneducated maid, I am very confused. Could you tell me what he is saying?”

“He’s saying it’s time for his silly skit.”

“That’s it!! Kill her nowwwwwww!!!!!”

The chubby middle-aged man shouted like he was throwing a tantrum, but the Vanderbilt lady still did not look concerned. She was not emotionless, however. She was intentionally sealing away her expressions and forcing a smile.

“You cannot do it.”

“Like hell I can’t, little girl!! How dare you object to the decisions of one with royal blood!!”

“After all, this is *his* battlefield.”

She had nothing to base this on, but she spoke as confidently as a dreaming maiden.

“You seem to be mistaken about something, so allow me to correct you. There is a reason I fell in love with the gentleman I did. He is strong enough to pick a fight with the centuries-old rift tearing apart Vanderbilt and Winchell. Meanwhile, the Legitimacy Kingdom’s framework is only about a single century old. My beloved darling has been fighting all alone against something several times that large, so did you really think he would falter before a newcomer like the commoner-noble-royal system!?”

“…”

“Don’t make me laugh, you unwanted royal. You have so much social status and yet you’re still a pathetic bachelor who never managed to win a single woman’s heart, so don’t underestimate the normal bonds between a man and a woman! He will be here. Even if the absurd surrounds him and the unreasonable stands in his way, he will come running if his fiancée calls for him! If I call for him as casually as asking for a drink, he would run through the apocalypse itself to come protect me!! There is no room for social status or bloodline there. If his woman is in danger, a man will silently make an enemy of the entire world. He will grab his sword, slay the dragon, and rescue the princess! It can be work, a war, a test at school, a contest, their first date, or anything else. Whether commoner, noble, or royal, they will envision that original image, grab whatever they see as their sword, find their princess, and face their dragon!! That is the driving force that ties together the Legitimacy Kingdom! And it is the framework you so definitively lack!! You utter fool!!!!”

She received no response.

No, she did hear an unintelligible cry.

The gun barrels protecting the Eggnog family and the Vanderbilt family began to move.

However, hadn’t she said something important?

He will be here.

He will come running.

At that exact moment, the Legitimacy Kingdom’s 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion’s First Generation Baby Magnum moved unnaturally close to the Rose & Lily.

It also made a turn that made no sense from a tactical standpoint.

Finally, a long, long rope was wrapped around one of the countless secondary cannons covering its spherical body like a sea urchin or chestnut burr.

Something was hanging from the other end of that rope.

It was Heivia Winchell.

As he was swung horizontally around, he flew through the air with the rope in hand. He was pulled up to the nine meter height of the Rose & Lily's deck and he collided with the many bodyguards waiting behind Flag Eggnog.

The heavy kick was just like a bowling ball hitting the pins.

Those bodyguards wielded carbines and had special armor or equipment below their clothing, but they were all swept away. A particularly unlucky one crashed right into the helicopter warming its engine to the side. He collided with the rapidly rotating tail rotor and a red smoothie splattered everywhere.

Heivia ignored them, let go of the rope, rolled a few times on the hard heliport, and then got up.

He could not have known the exact situation at that point. He did not know that the conflict between Winchell and Vanderbilt had been intentionally exacerbated or that it had been done to distract everyone from First Prince Flag Eggnog's gaffes. Nor did he know that the Vanderbilt lady had hunted down the evidence to prove it or that she was working with Karen and the other Winchell maids.

But the noble boy did not hesitate.

He looked across the scene.

He saw his fiancée and he saw who was aiming a gun at her.

That was all he needed.

Heivia Winchell immediately made up his mind based on the rules of the world he believed in.

"Looks like you've got a death wish, rich boy."

Part 19

A strange voice filled the stopped Destruction Fes's cockpit(?).

"Kiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!!"

"Stop it, Azureyfear! It's too late to start with the brother complex!!"

Part 20

The middle-aged man was completely left behind.

He simply stammered about some unrelated things on the heliport.

“I…I am a royal. I am First Prince Flag of the Eggnog family! Do you have any idea what will happen to a noble family that defies-…”

He came to a sudden stop.

Heivia had walked up, smashed the prince’s nose with his assault rifle’s stock, and grabbed the back of the middle-aged man’s neck as he desperately held his explosive nosebleed.

“Ah.”

He did not even have time to reply.

He was thrown forcefully through the air to move him as far from the young lady and the maids as possible. He rolled along, screeching shrilly, and finally found something to cling to with his bloody hands.

It was the sword stabbed vertically into the heliport.

It was mostly a decorative symbol of the two families’ legend than anything, but it was still a hunk of steel. Even if it had no blade, stabbing someone with the tip would kill them.

“E-ee-eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!”

Half in a frenzy, Flag pulled the one-handed rapier from its pedestal and pointed the tip toward Heivia.

Heivia simply narrowed his eyes.

He threw his assault rifle and military handgun aside and quietly drew a large military knife.

“Nice. I was getting sick of cleaning up all the filth, but this is finally looking a little more ‘noble’.”

“Wh-what do you think you’re doing?”

“We’re doing this like a true king and knight.”

“I am a royal! A mere noble dares turn his blade on me!?”

“You drew your blade first. Sorry, but this counts as self-defense.”

“Wha-? But…I…!?”

“And aren’t royals considered the top brass of the military from the moment they’re born? Surely you didn’t think you counted as a civilian. You’re not a commoner, after all.”

“…”

“I was officially ordered to stop this civil war. And now the man behind it all turns out to be a soldier, he’s holding a weapon right in front of me, and he intends to harm Legitimacy Kingdom civilians. To be honest, I can’t find a reason *not* to fight.”

Flag belatedly looked down to the sword in his hand, but it was too late. Of course, when most of his senses were numbed from having his nose smashed and he was thrown over to that pedestal, it had been obvious what Flag would do.

Heivia heard a sigh.

It came from Karen I. Winchell as she rubbed her index finger against her temple.

She was entirely onboard with this.

“I am aware it is rude for a mere maid to say this, but according to Legitimacy Kingdom law, commoners are guaranteed the right to punish nobles and nobles are guaranteed the same right to royals. …If someone has gone mad with power, the people may stage a justified rebellion or challenge them to a duel.”

“Did you really think I’d just go home after you threatened my woman?”

“Yooooooooooooooooooooooooouuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu just had to ruin the excuse I’d given you, didn’t you?”

Even as she pouted her lips, the eyepatch maid narrowed her eyes with a hint of happiness as she viewed her master’s determination. She and the Vanderbilt lady both took a step back.

“A member of the Vanderbilt family would officially be impartial to both parties, so I would like to ask you to be the witness to the duel.”

“Hey, wait.”

“Oh? Are you sure? I am Master Heivia’s fiancée, you know?”

“Wait, wait! Don’t just ignore me!!”

“Not to worry. I know you will not judge him lightly, lady. After all, the Vanderbilt family and the Winchell family have long been enemies. Especially thanks to a certain someone. Isn’t that right, Your Excellency?”

“Don’t…don’t ignore me and prepare to turn your swords on meeeeeeeeeeeee!!”

It was too late.

A clear change came over the way Winchell’s knight held his stainless steel knife. Instead of the style taught in military textbooks, he used one seen in sports. He stuck the blade forward, gently pulled back his empty left hand, and quietly pointed it at his target’s face.

One was a knife and the other a rapier, but the latter’s two or three times advantage in reach did not seem to matter.

The boy was prepared to kill in a single strike.

“En garde. I’ll give your life the brand of loser it deserves.”

(Why!? How!? I was perfect! There wasn't supposed to be anything to worry about!!)

The knight's duel used in the Legitimacy Kingdom was generally based around a training method known as *phrase d'arme* in which each side took turns attacking. One side would strike and the other would knock their blade aside and take their turn to attack. The process would then repeat with the attacker and defender reversed. The duel ended when one side surrendered or was knocked down.

There was no restriction on the weapon used.

The right hand generally held a rapier, but the length and weight could vary. The left hand could hold anything from a shield to a knife or gauntlet to block the attacks. As it was a fight rather than a sport, that was not surprising.

If someone insisted they would fight barehanded rather than use a sword, the duel would still be valid, even if it was basically suicide.

In other words, the duel would begin even if Flag refused to raise his rapier.

Flag tightened his grip on the hilt more because he was overpowered than because he was ready to fight, so Heivia grinned and made a suggestion.

"You can take the first attack, so come on. I'm a noble and the one who challenged you to the duel, so I'll show my respect for the royal who was willing to accept my challenge."

To translate that noble language into modern language:

I'll kill you with my counterattack.

I'll kill you with a triumphant smirk on my face.

(What do you mean I accepted your challenge, you fool!?)

Flag trembled without end.

He could feel the approaching wall of death. His decisions meant

nothing. He felt like he had been ordered to build a bulletproof truck with all the modifications he might want and then ordered to drive it full speed off the roof of a hundred-story building. He could instinctually tell that an unreasonable fate was sealing off any effort he might make.

So…

So…

So…

(Don't joke with me, you worthless noble. You're nothing more than an errand-runner who has been lent social status and land by us royals! I won't die. I refuse to die here!! I have royal blood in my veins, so the Legitimacy Kingdom needs me! Without me, this thousand-year kingdom will come crashing down! So I will do whatever it takes to win. I am allowed to!! The god-given rights of a royal are absolute! Did you really think the likes of you could trample over them!?)

As soon as the middle-aged man's internal pressure passed its limit, something unbelievable happened.

The dry sound of bursting gunpowder came from Flag Eggnog's hand.

While he held the rapier in his right hand, he pulled a palm-sized stapler-like device from his left sleeve. It was a self-defense handgun that fired when squeezed.

The scent of sparks wafted up from the small muzzle.

The bullet had flown too quickly to be seen.

And no matter why a bullet was fired, it would still kill whoever it hit. Heivia was not a superhero from TV or comic books, so he could not spot a flying bullet and dodge it.

"A duel? Who cares!? This is a real battlefield! Only the winner gets to survive!! Just because a bug manages to crawl up a little from the dirt doesn't mean it's worth fighting properly. A vulgar and rude

soul like yours deserves a pathetic death from a surprise attack!!”

It may have been because he was freed from the extreme tension or it may have been one of his usual gaffes, but the chubby middle-aged man shouted at the top of his lungs.

But…

“_____”

“Eh?”

Heivia never collapsed to the ground.

He did not take a single step, his expression remained unchanged, and he had not shed a single drop of blood.

“Why? Why, why, why, why!? This makes no sense! You’re supposed to be dead! What is this, what is this!? Are you saying you cut the bullet!? You’re not some Island Nation samurai, so you couldn’t possibly do that! You can’t do thaaaaat!!”

“Sigh… Of course he couldn’t.” Karen I. Winchell interrupted him with an exasperated sigh. “Not only was it a weak handgun bullet, but that self-defense gun is extremely short and has no sight to guide your aim. These guns you hide in your palm are at best supposed to drive off a thug at less than five meters. They’re mostly just a decoration meant to scare them with the noise of the gunshot. Not to mention that you were shooting from the hip to make it a surprise. …The real surprise would be if it had actually hit.”

There was no restriction on the weapon used for the duel.

Once he made some kind of attack, it counted as his turn. And Heivia had implicitly said the following earlier:

You go first.

I’ll kill you with my counterattack.

“That’s why…”

Heivia took a step forward.

He made sure to touch the tip of the rapier with his knife to signify it was his turn.

Flag squeezed the stapler-like gun a few more times, but he completely forgot it had only been loaded with a single bullet and it simply clicked in vain.

"…you're…"

Heivia focused on the tensed muscles of the arm he held forward as he approached stabbing range.

Flag threw the gun away and quickly raised his rapier. He no longer cared about the duel. He was clearly preparing to stab his approaching opponent, rules be damned. Even as panic and intent to kill filled his sweaty face, he formed a lowly smile and mouthed some words.

Wait.

I'll pay you however much you want.

"…a failure!!!!!"

With a dull sound, Heivia's military knife pierced the man's heart. It plunged in with enough force that the bloody blade stuck out from his back.

There was no need to hold back.

The corpse's expression was frozen in a smile and filthy blood flowed from the crescent moon shape like a drain regurgitating its contents. First, the rapier fell from Flag's hand and then Heivia swung his knife to the side to fling the filth from the blade. This threw the skewered man to the ground and Heivia returned the bloody knife to its sheath.

The Vanderbilt lady put her hands on her hips and spoke up.

“You’re late.”

“I made it in time for our date, didn’t I, baby?”

The dragon slaying was complete.

In that case, the victorious knight could expect to at least wrap his arms around the princess’s waist.

Epilogue

“This is a tragedy.”

“What is?”

After being pulled up onto a naval supply ship while soaked to the bone, Quenser spoke and Heivia replied.

The student threw his exhausted body onto the railing, but he seemed to have a surprising amount of energy left.

“You have to ask? I have to have worn years off my life here and I kind of saved the world from disaster, yet I have nothing to show for it! Goddammit! The Destruction Fes’s greatest strength was its ability to ignore a manned Object’s inertial limits thanks to the Orchestra System, but the Object itself was really just a First Generation! The Black Uniform named Meena took a trip to heaven when her brains were blown out! And Azureyfear was taken away as the big boss of that drug war! What the hell!? I wasn’t fighting for justice, you know!?”

“Yeah, you really are the worst.”

“Tch. You can only say that because you’ve got your girlfriend!! This all goes back to a mess in your Winchell family!! It was all some horrible sibling rivalry, so why did it all work out great for you!? The world doesn’t care that you managed to confirm your love for each other! Pay up!! Pay me a nuisance fee or consolation fee for putting up with your lovey-dovey crap!! The Legitimacy Kingdom needs to introduce a couples tax!!”

“Oh, shut up. If you’ll accept payment in punches, I’m more than willing to pay. Besides, that’s the position *I’m* always stuck in! How do you like getting a taste of your own medicine, idiot!? How about apologizing once in a while!?”

The two idiots grabbed at each other’s hair and began their own Round 2 of the final battle.

“Not to mention that Frolaytia said we were supposed to visit the beach with all the girls in swimsuits after retrieving the container during that inspection at the very start!! What happened to that!?”

“Eh? Are you serious!? Okay, I’ll make a fuss too!!”

“Swimsuits! Swimsuits!! Swimsuits!!!”

“Yahoo!!”

They called a truce after finding some common ground.

Most wars ended in compromise after both sides split the benefits or when they grew tired of fighting. Even the greatest chess or shogi champion who could beat the latest supercomputer could not hope to take every single enemy piece. Some might say not to wage war in the first place, but unfortunately, even those champions’ brains were not evolved enough to determine the winner and loser while still lining the pieces up on the board.

“So what’s going to happen to Azureyfear? While I kind of want to see her again, I’d be terrified if she casually showed up for revenge thanks to skirting the laws as a noble or something.”

“Don’t worry. Not even the noble or royal council will cover for the leader of a drug war. It would look way too bad. The countless stealth subs and satellites of the Orchestra System used ten thousand people, right? There has to be a ton they want to ask her: about any accountants managing secret bank accounts, her men inside the safe countries, how much the hawks of the main Winchell family were involved in this below the surface, who she used to contact the Information Alliance, how connected the entire Eggnog royal family was, and more. She’ll be stuck behind bars until the entire backbone of the drug war has been dismantled.”

“Aren’t you afraid of her making a plea bargain?”

“When it could take years just to go over all of the charges against her? She might go to her grave still waiting for her trial. She’ll be a princess chained up in a tower.”

“Great, that just makes her a rarer catch.”

“It takes a special kind of genius to say that kind of thing in front of her brother, you know?”

Quenser sighed and relaxed his shoulders.

“But that means I can rest easy.”

“Well, knowing her, she’ll probably end up being some kind of legendary prisoner who controls everything in her maximum security prison. She might even make some strange mutation into an armchair fixer who controls the world from behind bars or into a master jailbreaker who incites the normal people into revolting and attacking the prison.”

Heivia laughed and showed no concern for his blood-related sister.

Or rather, he seemed to trust her in a negative way.

He did not see that girl as someone who would spend her life in the miniature garden provided to her.

“Y’know, it’s still a shock. It comes back to me whenever I let my guard down.”

“Hm? Are you still dragging around that stuff about the Black Uniform or Azureyfear?”

“What is this? I hope I haven’t picked up a habit of only falling for really dangerous women. But it’s summer! So maybe I can’t help but search out some kind of exciting adventure!!”

“Haven’t you always had that habit?”

As Heivia rested on the supply ship’s railing, he pointed his thumb back toward the ocean.

A Legitimacy Kingdom First Generation was slowly cutting across the water there.

It was the Baby Magnum.

“How can you say that after all the time you’ve spent pursuing the

most dangerous girl in the world?”

“First Prince Flag of the Eggnog royal family of the Legitimacy Kingdom’s Warta District sought to defend his honor in a duel aboard a ship in the South Atlantic and lost his life. According to the witness, he fought courageously and majestically without giving a single step to the very end.”

After just barely protecting the Celestial Flowers fireworks festival, the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion visited the nearest naval port.

As they resupplied, Frolaytia Capistrano crossed her legs in the room provided to her as an officer and threw a newspaper onto the table.

The elderly brigadier general on her laptop spoke up with exasperation in his voice.

“Now, now, Frolaytia. You mustn’t treat the news of His Excellency’s death with such disregard. We must at least frame a painting of him on the wall.”

“If I may be frank, I question your credibility when you’re red in the face and chugging down a bottle of cognac.”

“This is nothing compared to what’s going on in public. And what do you think is happening there? Nothing. The commoners are the epitome of cruel and uncaring.”

That may have been true.

The people with their busy lives in the safe countries could not care less about a war in a distant country or the issues of the privileged classes.

A drug war had come to an end.

A lull had come over the conflict between the Winchell and Vanderbilt families.

So what?

“To be honest, I was pretty nervous,” said Frolaytia.

“Well, one of your men *did* abandon his duties, begin a personal duel, and end up killing the first prince of a royal family. But duels are viewed as a means of resolving crises, so they’re given higher priority than normal duties. War is a type of crisis and all that trouble was resolved with a duel. That means everything was handled appropriately. At least according to the Legitimacy Kingdom’s traditions of kings and knights.”

“Everyone kept saying that and it seemed too convenient, so I was worried it was some kind of trap.”

“Ho ho! Being cautious is good, but you shouldn’t suspect people’s kindness, Frolaytia. You might be trying to keep yourself safe, but that will only bring unnecessary trouble.”

“I will keep that in mind.”

“Good. And there won’t be a problem with the Eggnog family. The second and third princesses are truly excellent, you see? The first was just in the way, so all of their aides had apparently been worrying over how to omit him from the line of succession.”

“Brigadier general.”

“My apologies. I may have said too much.”

He apologized, but he did not stop drinking his alcohol.

Frolaytia was bothered by this unheard-of behavior for a superior officer, but the old man had more to say.

“Frolaytia.”

“What is it?”

“Who is it that starts wars?”

His voice had an oddly dry ring to it.

These were the words of an old man who had been given his high rank after commanding so many victorious battles in the past that sending him to the battlefield was only seen as an extreme show of force.

“Countless gears interact and no single person can stop it. That is war. But if you can say those who do not work to stop it are actively supporting it, then you could say it is actually the residents of the peaceful countries that cause war. The taxes they so innocently pay fill the national treasury, allow for uncaring foreign policy, and provide a mistaken sense that the nation can continue its wars. We have battlefield countries and safe countries, but no matter how much water you scoop from the floor with your bucket, you won’t accomplish a thing without first shutting off the faucet. War has become a seemingly painless sport that may never end as long as that distinction between countries remains.”

Frolaytia could not immediately reply.

This was not limited to the drug war. No conflict would end if its root cause was not eliminated. Just like the centuries of hatred behind the Winchell and Vanderbilt families’ conflict. And just like drugs, could people even rid themselves of that? That driving force behind conflict had been with man for all of history. In fact, it may have been with them even when they were still animals.

That was a difficult question.

The young woman gave up on giving a deep answer and simply gave her honest impression.

“I am too inexperienced to answer that.”

“Ho ho. There’s no need to think too deeply about it. And I’m not being very nice to ask you a question without a set answer like that. You can ignore it as the ramblings of a lonely old man.”

The two of them continued their insignificant chat for a little bit after that.

Just like with the old maintenance lady, Frolaytia was no match for

those with so much more experience than her. Her weaknesses always showed themselves in front of him.

Finally, the brigadier general said one last thing.

“But a drug war, hm?”

“Yes. What about it?”

“That is an unpleasant term, Frolaytia.”

She could not help but laugh at his far too direct statement.

That may have been how it was with the truly wise statements.

One did not need an intentionally complicated wording that made people tilt their head. Something off the top of one’s head would hold the kind of meaning that could reach the entire world.

And he could only do that because he was a famous commander who had left his mark on history. His soul had been honed to the point that his ample experience and deep thoughts naturally brought those statements to his lips.

People like him were very different from the strategically-made heroes. No one worked to make them appear impressive. Word of them would naturally spread from person to person until they were spoken of forevermore. Unlike those who were forgotten by the history books, these people would continue to shine all on their own.

Everyone understood they were someone who could not be ignored.

(I really do have a long way to go.)

Frolaytia Capistrano did not bother hiding her smile as she agreed in a more casual tone.

“Yes, it may be the worst term in all of history.”

Afterword

Here we are at Volume 11.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

As you know if you've read the book already, this volume takes a deeper look at how the nobles like Heivia do things. Normally, Quenser and Heivia are looking at the external enemies like the Capitalist Corporations or Information Alliance and pointing out the twisted side of those world powers, but this time they're looking at the twisted side of their own Legitimacy Kingdom. I tried going for the reverse of the usual pattern where the suspense grows from Chapter 1 to Chapter 3 and I think it gave a bit of a different atmosphere from normal. I will leave it to you to judge that.

The task I gave myself this time was to make an almost too obvious villain. Yes, it was just like something from a two-hour suspense drama! I made it so Azureyfear was suspicious from the start. Almost too suspicious! But she was getting along so well with them, she was cute, and she almost seemed suspicious to a suspicious extent, so surely she had to be innocent!! I was trying to build up that kind of confusion, but was I successful? To be honest, this was my first time trying it, so this will be a useful experience whether I succeeded or not.

I got into some pretty harsh stuff with the mines and drugs, but while looking through information on them, I realized that humans have a way of finding infinite possibilities in a negative way too. The evolution of mines is completely insane. When a mechanical sensor sends an explosive raining down from overhead, does it even count as a mine anymore? And the world of what is commonly called "white powder" apparently has designer drugs that are remade to slip past the latest tests like a computer virus with security software, so we really are hopeless.

Well, let's set aside the awful accomplishments of mankind and talk about a different sort of possibility. I've generally made Heavy

Object so you can start with Volume 1 and enjoy the following novels no matter where you start, but this was a test of having certain people reappearing more frequently and in a position necessary for the story to progress. I tried to make sure you could understand their characters well enough even with only this volume and I intend to continue with the original concept of this series, but if you'll accept what I did here, maybe it's possible some other characters could show up in important scenes to go on a rampage?

I give my thanks to my illustrator Nagi Ryou-san and my editors Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anan-san. With all the small things like the various mines, the bulls, and the Armadillos in addition to the Objects, I doubt this one was easy. Thank you for sticking with me this time too.

I also give my thanks to the readers. I snuck in the series' first space battle and a knight's duel, so I think I ended up playing fast and loose with the structure on this one. But what did you think? I hope you sensed more and wider possibilities there.

And I will end this here.

I hope this book will remain in your heart in some way.

I really like the astronauts and the bodyguard who ran away.

-Kamachi Kazuma